Abstract

While there is an abundance of grief literature, as well as literature about Jewish grief, there is an absence of literature about clergy grief and mourning. This thesis strives to answer the question of what happens when the rabbi or cantor needs pastoral care? And furthermore, how does this loss of a child uniquely impact the clergy person, both personally and professionally? Primarily using interviews with clergy who have lost a child, as well as using grief literature, this thesis examines how clergy experiences of grief intersect with Jewish tradition and research on grief. This thesis also uses biblical and other ancient Jewish texts to compare the experience of biblical characters in grief, with that of modern clergy. In the first three chapters this thesis provides an overview of the literature and methodologies, an exploration of the personal meaning that this cohort of clergy finds in Jewish ritual, and goes deeply into both the private and public grieving processes of these members of the clergy. The last two chapters explore how the clergy reckon their loss with their faith, and examine how they move forward while always holding this grief with them.

“GRIEF CAN’T BE FIXED, IT CAN ONLY BE CARRIED”: HOW CLERGY GRIEVE INTERNALLY AND EXTERNALLY AFTER LOSING A CHILD

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Introduction

A few years ago as my mom and I drove from my parents' house to our family's cabin in the Berkshires, my mom began to reflect on the funeral of her dear friend Lorraine that she had attended a few days before. The two of them had met in residency and were in a book club together that continues to meet almost 30 years later. Lorraine was very closely connected to her church, serving in the choir, and raising her children to love the community, and vice versa. Not to mention her husband Burns who happens to be the pastor of the congregation.

As my mom described her funeral to me, she described the awe she felt at how Burns smoothly led his family, friends and community in mourning his own wife, and this woman they all knew and loved. "How did he do that?" she wondered aloud to me, "as he was grieving his own loss, he was also helping the community through theirs."

My mom and I had this conversation when I was in my 3rd year of rabbinical school, a long while before I would have to begin thinking about my thesis topic, but always the one to start early, my wheels began to turn. I thought about the several rabbis I knew who had suffered untimely losses of children and spouses: how did they grapple with their own grief, as well the grief of their congregation? What happened when the one who is used to offering pastoral support, is the one who now needs it? (How) do they let their congregations into their grief?

I began to think about these questions, and run the topic by anyone who would listen. I was consistently met with sincere interest, and the comment, “wow, I don’t think anyone has done anything like that” as well as suggestions for who I should talk to. I began to keep a very sad note on my phone- a list of clergy who had lost close family members. As the list began to grow, I was overwhelmed by the enormity of this community of clergy who had lost close loved ones in an untimely way- children, spouses, siblings, etc. With the help of my advisor, the incomparable Rabbi Nancy Wiener, I realized I was going to have to narrow my focus. I decided to focus on clergy who had lost children, both because of the tragedy and uniqueness of that kind of loss, and because I unfortunately had the largest pool of potential interviewees that way.

Even before discovering this topic, I knew I wanted to do an interview-based thesis, spending the many hours I knew this thesis would take by talking to people and learning their stories. That is exactly what I did, and I have been deeply honored and moved by the way these clergy opened their hearts to me.

In Mark Nepo’s Foreword to Megan Devine’s book *It’s OK That You’re Not OK*, he writes,

> In living our one life, we are here to love and lose...If we commit to loving, we will inevitably know loss and grief. If we try to avoid loss and grief, we will never truly love. Yet powerfully and mysteriously, knowing both love and loss is what brings us fully and deeply alive.[1]

[1] Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand* Devine, xi

This thesis is about loss and grief, but it is mostly about love. The love that these clergy have for their children, the love the congregants have for their clergy, and how that love is honored and shown. Through my conversations with these remarkable people, several themes emerged, and I therefore structured my writing according to those themes, intertwining Jewish text and grief literature as well. The following is the map of how the thesis is structured:

I begin in Chapter 1 by giving a brief overview of the grief literature, specifically focusing on a few books that have most profoundly informed my work. This chapter continues with background on traditional Jewish mourning practices, giving a baseline for understanding the choices that the clergy made in their own grieving processes. And finally, I write about my methodology- how I gathered interviewees and how the interviews were conducted.

Chapter 2 details how the clergy observed Jewish rituals throughout their grieving processes, and how they made those rituals their own. They each grappled with how to grieve in their own ways, ways that both honored their child who had passed, and Jewish tradition. This chapter also features a close study of the text from the Book of Job from where we get the practice of Shiva.

Chapter 3 discusses the ways in which clergy chose to grieve privately and publicly. This chapter acknowledges the difficulty of the clergy role as it pertains to being a public figure, as well as detailing the different coping mechanisms that helped them get

through their intense grief after the death. Many, though not all, of the clergy were serving in congregations at the time, and so this chapter also addresses their experiences in interacting with their congregants, as well as the kind of support they received from the community.

Chapter 4 gets into theology and how these members of the clergy understand the death of their child in the grand scheme of the world. They talk about how they have been able to maintain their faith and belief in God, despite the tragedy that happened in their family. Comparing their conceptualizations to that of Job and Aaron when they lost their sons, their reckoning with God is the subject of this chapter. Furthermore, as clergy, they are charged with the task of explaining God to others- how do they do this when they are not feeling close to God? Or sure about who God is in the world?

Chapter 5 is about how this cohort of clergy began to move forward with their lives following their loss. In this chapter, the reader learns about how they go back to work, or do not, and move into a less intense stage of grief. This chapter addresses what it was like for these clergy members to return to work, and ease back into work that includes consoling families who have been through loss. How do they continue to live with their grief? How has their loss changed their pastoral perspective? And how do they go about rebuilding their family? All of these questions will be addressed in this chapter.

The Conclusion brings together all of the above chapters, and details what I have learned from doing a close study of these different aspects of grief. My general

conclusions are of course based solely on this small sample. Therefore, I also address questions that I believe still need to be answered, as well as areas for potential future research.

Chapter 1

Background and Methodology

Grief Literature

Grief literature encompasses a broad category and many books in this area repeat the same studies and theories. For the purpose of this thesis, I chose a few emblematic examples that focus on particular areas of grief that are relevant to the topic at hand.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is a heralded grief researcher, coining her 5 stages of grief- denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.[2] She writes that these are steps that grieving people go through as they grapple with the death of their loved one. She never intended, as is made clear in her books, for these to be linear stages. Kubler-Ross asserts that these are five different stages that someone in mourning might go through in different orders, repeating each stage at various moments throughout their grieving process. However, somewhere along the way, her process got misconstrued, and began to be criticized for its linear, limiting nature. Her process, intended to help those in grief to make sense of what they were feeling, began to make mourners feel like their grief was being put into a box.

A new wave of grief books, including *It's OK That You're Not OK*, written by Megan Devine, is authored by those who have experienced deep grief, and want to help others through it. These books strive to give those who are going through grief, a guide to help

[2] Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, "On Death and Dying".

them feel less alone, and to normalize the crazy-making feelings that they are experiencing.

> That all grief is valid does not mean that all grief is the same. Ordinary heartbreaks are difficult, even without reordering the world as you know it. Random, out-of-order, life-altering losses have an echo that reverberates in a different way. Not better, not worse- simply not the same...We don't need new tools for how to get out of grief. What we need are the skills to withstand it, in ourselves and in others.[3]

The goal of Megan Devine's book, and others like it, is to help readers feel seen in their grief, and to give them the validation and the skills to get through it. Devine, herself, lost her husband when he drowned in an accident in 2009. She writes her book from a place of deep understanding that everyone's process of grief is different, and that is what she attempts to address in her book. A therapist herself, with a masters in counseling psychology, she was astounded at how deep her grief felt, and how wrong she had been in her counseling approach with clients who were grieving. She did not get it until she was going through it herself.

David Kessler had a similar experience. He had been a grief researcher and counselor for his whole life, co-authoring two books with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, but did not truly understand the stakes of his work until his own son died at age 21. He wrote his book Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief to build upon the work that he and Kubler-Ross had done together, as well as to honor his son's life. In the book he argues that a

[3] Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand.*

sixth stage of grief, in which a mourning person finds meaning in the death of their loved one, is essential for them to move forward out of the five stages and into life. Kessler is sure to emphasize that this does not mean that their loved one's death happened for a reason, one of the most dreaded tropes that mourners hear, rather this means finding a way to create meaning in the aftermath of the tragedy. He shares examples of mourners who have started foundations, taken up a favorite hobby of the deceased, traveled around the country talking about their loved one, and many more[4].

Both Megan Devine and David Kessler (not unlike clergy) were in the business of helping people through difficult moments, and after their own losses, were awakened to grief in a different way.

The Traditional Jewish Grieving Process

In this section I will present the basics of the traditional Jewish grieving process. It is important to understand that the clergy with whom I spoke are all Reform clergy, and therefore do not feel obligated to Jewish tradition in the same way that more traditionally observant clergy might. While the Reform clergy who were interviewed for this thesis do not tend to subscribe to traditional practices, it is an important foundation to help understand the choices that they did make when grieving their child.

[4] David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: the Sixth Stage of Grief*.

Jewish tradition outlines a very clear grieving process for Jewish families, which Maurice Lamm describes in his book The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning.[5] The Jewish mourning laws that I will detail below are all intended as a structure for the mourner, to help them find grounding in a difficult time. As Maurice Lamm writes,

> Mourning laws are primarily yekara de-khayye, therapy for the living, devoted to the mitigating of intense grief, the slow disentanglement from the web of guilt, anger, fear, hatred and rebellion that enshrouds the mind of the mourner after his relative has been taken from life.[6]

As we explore the traditional mourning rituals, it is important to keep this in mind, that each of these is meant to help the mourner. We often think about rituals around death as being for the deceased, which they are as well, but they are additionally meant to be comforting to those left behind.

Between Death and Funeral

Jewish tradition grounds the death, burial and mourning rituals upon two complementary values: Kavod HaMet and Nichum Aveilim. Kavod HaMet means respect for the dead. Because it is a Jewish value that each person is created in God's image, each person's body should be treated with the same sacredness, even if the soul has left the body. Lamm compares the deceased to an ancient Torah scroll that can no longer be in use- we treat it with the utmost respect and reverence, though it does not serve its same purpose.[7] There are many ways in which Kavod HaMet is

[5] Unless otherwise noted, all citations in this section about the traditional grieving process are from Maurice Lamm's *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, as this work is considered to be authoritative on the topic of Jewish law and death and mourning rituals.
[6] Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 30.
[7] Ibid, 3.

enacted in the traditional Jewish process of caring for the body before burial. The body is not meant to be left alone between death and burial- traditionally the family members of the deceased will find a *shomer*, a guard, to sit with the body and recite psalms. The role of *shomer* can be carried out by an individual or a rotating group of people who take turns sitting with the body.

Another aspect of Kavod HaMet includes how the body is cared for and prepared for burial. Every Jewish community[8] has a *chevra kadisha*, a group of pious Jews who have taken on this communal responsibility of washing the body with the utmost care. *Tahara,* this act of purifying the body for burial, is considered a requirement of Jewish law, and is the ultimate example of *Kavod HaMet*.

Nichum Aveilim means comforting the bereaved. The sages teach us that it is a sacred obligation to provide comfort for those who are mourning, no matter how close we are to the person. This emphasizes the importance that the rituals around death be comforting to the mourner.

The deceased is supposed to be buried as soon after the death as possible. Because the soul is considered to have left the body, it is considered disrespectful in the eyes of Jewish tradition to leave the physical body on this earth without resolution for any long period of time. It is *Kavod HaMet* to bury the body as soon as possible. Furthermore, the time between the death and the burial is considered “the valley of the shadow of

[8] Not every synagogue has a chevre kaddisha, so many Jewish funeral homes have one.

death", and once the deceased has been buried, the loved ones can know that their body is at rest.[9] In this way, to bury the deceased as soon as possible is also *Nichum Aveilim.*

Anytime between finding out about the death, and the funeral service, the direct mourners (children, parents, siblings, spouse) engage in the process of *k'riah*, meaning "cut", where they tear an item of their clothing in the spot over their heart as a symbol of their emotional distress over their loss. This custom comes from the Bible, in which several characters rent their clothing after hearing about the news of the death of their loved one.[10] While this custom has evolved among more liberal communities, in religious communities, mourners still tear a piece of their clothing that they will wear for the first seven days after burial.

Funeral

As Lamm describes it, the funeral service is meant to honor the deceased, and has the side effect of comforting the mourner in certain ways. Taking place at the synagogue, funeral home, a chapel at the cemetery or at graveside, the funeral service consists of the recitation of a eulogy, chanting of psalms, and the traditional memorial prayer El Male Rachamim. After the funeral service, the close family accompanies the deceased to the internment site, which the Sages tell us is a great sign of respect. According to

[9] Ibid, 22.
[10] Jacob upon seeing Joseph's bloody coat (Gen.37:34), David when hearing of the death of King Saul (2 Samuel 1:11), Job heard of the deaths of several family members and rent his mantle (Job 1:20)

Lamm, Jewish tradition[11] unequivocally instructs us to bury our dead in the ground[12], and a Jew should never be cremated. After the loved ones accompany the casket of the deceased to the grave, it is there that they recite the Mourner's Kaddish[13], and once the casket is lowered into the grave, they each take turns filling the grave with earth.

Shiva, Sheloshim, and Shana

Shiva is the seven-day period after the burial of the deceased, in which the family members sit in their homes and receive visitors who offer condolences to the family. Traditionally, the mourners cover the mirrors in their homes, and sit on the ground, or on low stools. They refrain from shaving and other grooming activities as well, during this time. These specifications exist in order for the mourner to be focused on their sadness and grief, and as an aspect of *Kavod HaMet*. To be concerned with appearance (looking in mirrors, shaving and grooming) is an act of disrespect to the deceased.

There will often be a short service during shiva, so that the mourners will have the opportunity to say the Mourner's Kaddish, traditionally an obligation for the 11 months following the burial. On the Shabbat during shiva, the mourners do not receive visitors or hold a shiva minyan, but private mourning continues. There is also an assumption that the mourners will join the community in Shabbat worship, so they can continue to recite the Mourner's Kaddish with a minyan.

[11] Gen. 3:19, Deut. 21:23

[12] With the exception of locations where there is a high water table, above ground burials are then allowed.

[13] Traditional communities will recite the Burial Kaddish at this point, a slightly altered version of the Mourner's Kaddish which suggests that the deceased will "be raised up to everlasting life".

After the period of shiva, the mourner is still in the period of shloshim, the first 30 days after laying their loved one to rest. At this time, according to Jewish tradition, the mourner is meant to begin to reintegrate into society. They no longer sit in their homes, like they did during shiva, and are meant to socialize and be with others, but still should not attend celebrations like parties or weddings.

The twelve months of mourning begins on the day that the loved one passed away, as opposed to the other periods of mourning which begin with internment. This period of mourning includes saying the Mourner's Kaddish daily. Many of these mourning practices, especially the recitation of Kaddish, are traditionally the responsibility of a child for a parent. In fact, the law states that the responsibility is on a son, and the daughter of the deceased is not obligated to recite Kaddish for the twelve months. The patriarchal nature of this law aside, these mourning laws were created for a child to mourn their parent. They were not designed for aparent to mourn a child as is the experience of the clergy written about here, but over time Jews have modified these mourning traditions to fit their own circumstances.

"Post-Mourning"[14] Practices

The following are some of the traditional practices in which Jews engage after a longer period of time following the death of their loved one. The unveiling is the dedication of the headstone or footstone on the grave of the deceased, and can lawfully happen anytime in the first year after a death. Most often it happens in the latter half of the first

[14] The use of quotes in the heading above is my own editorial addition, to emphasize that nobody can dictate when the mourner has "finished" mourning.

year of mourning. This service involves the removal of a veil over the gravestone, and the recitation of a few psalms, as well as El Male Rachamim and Kaddish.[15][16]

The yahrzeit, the anniversary of a loved one's death, and the Yizkor service, the commemoration of all our loved ones who came before us as a community during major holy days, are fixed ways to honor and remember our loved ones. The yahrtzeit is commemorated on the Hebrew date of the passing, and the family will say Kaddish for their loved one on this date. Many people light a memorial candle to observe the yahrzeit as well. The yizkor service, a special memorial service, happens at the synagogue on Yom Kippur, Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot, and is traditionally accompanied by an act of charity that honors deceased ancestors. These are also both opportunities for individuals to join together with their community at times when they might be most missing their dearly departed relatives.

Methodology

The nature of the Jewish community is such that all of my 9 interviewees were found through word of mouth. The ones who I did not already know about, I learned about through clergy colleagues who we had in common, and in one case, an interviewee directed me toward someone. I reached out to the clergy via email, either by introduction by a mutual acquaintance or directly, if I already knew them. There were 3

[15] Traditionally, the Kaddish should only be said if there is a minyan present. If not, the service proceeds without a Kaddish.
[16] This practice does not have ancient origins, rather it is a modern practice that has become an accepted part of the grieving process today. Jewish Cemetery Association of Massachusetts, "Jewish Cemetery, Burial and Mourning Customs," 2020, https://www.jcam.org/Pages/Foundation/Education/articles/monument-unveiling-traditions.php.

clergy who I reached out to, who declined to participate. All interviews took place via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and lasted between 30 minutes- 1 hour.

Of the 9 interviewees, 6 of them are part of a clergy couple. I chose to interview these 6 individuals separately, to get their unique takes on their grieving process without the influence of their spouse. I acknowledge that perhaps interviewing them together would have offered a united front about the way the couple handled family matters around the grief process.

I conducted each interview using a core list of questions[17] that I developed based on what I was curious about, as well as the grief literature I had read. After developing this list of questions, I consulted with Dr. Wendy Cadge, Professor of Sociology and social science researcher specifically in the area of religion. Her expertise helped me to edit and refine the question template. I used the template as just that, and conducted each interview organically, allowing the conversation to flow based on what the interviewee shared, and what felt like it needed further explanation. Therefore, every interview was unique, and did not follow a strict formula. Furthermore, each circumstance was different so naturally the interviews followed different paths. For example: for the deaths that occurred due to illness, we spoke about that process before getting to the grief.

[17] See Appendix 1

Chapter 2

Finding Personal Meaning in Jewish Ritual

"Judaism does teach the aching heart how to express its pain in love and respect, and how to achieve the eventual consolation, which will restore us to humanity and keep us from vindictiveness and self-pity." - Maurice Lamm[18]

Liberal clergy, especially congregational clergy, spend their careers teaching about and helping others develop personal Jewish ritual. In my research I was interested to see how clergy approach this issue when it was their own personal Jewish ritual that would be observed. Liberal clergy also have the license to create and adapt ritual in a way that is not limited by halakha.

Overall, the clergy I interviewed expressed an affinity for Jewish rituals, but a lack of connection to prayer in the immediate aftermath of their loss. Most of them eventually found their way back to prayer[19], and experienced a deepened and enhanced appreciation for the power of ritual going forward. Cantor Ellen Dreskin expressed this eloquently in our conversation: "The ritual was scaffolding also. The rituals were very powerful. I understand ritual in a way that I did not before, and that totally affects the way I approach ritual now as a clergy person."[20] Not every clergy person felt this way, however. This chapter will explore several of the main Jewish rituals around loss, and how the clergy experienced them in their own grief processes.

[18]Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 3.
[19] This will be further explored in Chapter 4- Reckoning with God and Faith
[20] Dreskin, Cantor Ellen. Personal Interview.

Funeral

"Beyond Tears: Living After Losing a Child" is a compilation of stories from nine mothers who have all lost a child. The book is designed for other grieving parents to read, and they hope it will serve as a guide to them, as they walk a most difficult path. The first two sentences of the introduction are striking: "There are certain truisms in life. One of them is that it goes against the natural order of things to bury one's child."[21] Children are supposed to bury their parents; parents are not supposed to bury their children. While funerals of any kind are often difficult for the loved ones of the deceased, when it is a child who has died, it usually becomes even more painful. We anticipate that one day we will have to bury our parents. We never expect to bury our child.

Some of the clergy with whom I spoke had the unusual opportunity and dreadful responsibility to plan the funeral ahead of time because their child was suffering from a terminal illness. Rabbi Phyllis Sommer describes a conversation soon after she and her husband told their son that he was going to die. The senior rabbi at the congregation where Rabbi Sommer was the assistant was also a very close friend of the family; Rabbi Sommer describes him "like my older brother", and he was also one of the only people Sam would allow to visit him in the hospital.

> Sam looked at Steven and said, "So, who's going to do my funeral?" At that moment I was like, wow, this is a clergy kid right here..I remember thinking that I was glad he asked Steven and not me...I had thought about a lot of things up until that point, but I had never thought about what a funeral would look like for my own kid.[22]

[21] Carol Barkin and Ellen Mitchell, *Beyond Tears: Living after Losing a Child*, 1.
[22] Sommer, Rabbi Phyllis. Personal Interview.

Perhaps when your parents are rabbis, as is one of their closest friends, it makes sense for one of the first questions out of a child's mouth about his impending death is about who will officiate at his funeral. Rabbi Sommer describes the culture of their home as one in which both she and her husband would share when they were going to preside over a funeral. Therefore, discussion about funerals was common in their house. It is hard to imagine this conversation occurring in another type of household, aside from perhaps that of a funeral director.

Rabbi Allenberg describes how painful it was for him and his wife to begin to plan for such a thing, so early in their marriage. Their daughter was only a little over a year old, so they did not have the same dilemma as the Sommer family, yet they had struggles of their own.

> She died at home with us...Lauren and I had been married 5 years at that point but we didn't have cemetary plots purchased; we hadn't had those conversations yet...We found hospice, we had to decide where we wanted to bury her, and all while she's still alive.[23]

When you are a young couple, you hope that you will not need to have these conversations yet, but unfortunately Rabbi Allenberg's family did. Throughout Sophia's illness there were moments of hope where they thought she might pull through, so acknowledging that her death was imminent and then having to make those plans in their time of deep pain was heartbreaking. The funeral was not a particularly meaningful aspect of the grieving process for Rabbi Allenberg; he only has memories of the funeral

[23] Allenberg, Rabbi Adam. Personal Interview.

in bits and pieces. This inconsistent memory loss is common among those who are grieving a loss.

> There is a clumsy forgetfulness that often comes with grief...No matter how your short-term memory worked before your loss, it has likely changed in your grief...Your mind can only retain so many things, so it simply drops what is not necessary for survival. It's like triage in the mind.[24]

Most of the clergy people I spoke with described something like this during a period of time following the death of their child. The length of this period of hazy and unreliable memory varied, but the presence of this period of time was pretty consistent.

For Rabbi and Cantor Dreskin, the funeral was an incredibly important part of their grieving process, and the flexibility of Reform Judaism to do the funeral in whichever way they liked, was vital. Rabbi Dreskin reflects on this process:

> What do we want this service to look like? How do we make this service right to say goodbye to **our son**? To not do the service that we all know how to do, but to do the service that's right for him. That's just about the only place we had to do any kind of thinking.[25]

A clergy person can do a funeral in their sleep; however for the Dreskin family, they wanted to make sure that the service reflected who Jonah was and how he lived his life. They did not want it to just be a standard Jewish funeral service; it was important to them for the service to reflect Jonah's unique personhood. They both spoke powerfully about the coffin that Jonah was buried in; the funeral director suggested a somewhat

[24] Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*, 125.
[25] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.

unorthodox ritual of Jonah's loved ones having the opportunity to decorate the plain pine casket. The family felt that this beautifully represented Jonah, so that was a part of the funeral that they still look back on and remember was so powerful, to see Jonah's resting place surrounded by the writings, drawing and signatures of all the people who knew and loved him.[26]

Several of the clergy I spoke with described the time between finding out about the death of their child and anywhere from a month to several months after their child's death as living in a fog[27]. Therefore they shared only snapshots of memory about the funeral. The power of these moments stick with them years later.

> The burial was private, and the funeral was public. The burial was just really a couple dozen people, family and very closest friends. As we stood at the graveside...a dear friend started singing Oseh Shalom, and they ushered us in song into returning to our cars and going back to life.[28]

For Rabbi Perlmeter one of the most memorable pieces of the burial, was this moment with just close friends and family. He had perhaps just done one of the most difficult things someone could do- buried his son- and he felt so surrounded in love and song by those closest to him. While it would be a while before he would feel truly alive, he found this moment at the end of the funeral to be especially poignant.

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[26] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.
Dreskin, Cantor Dreskin. Personal Interview.
[27] Frimmer, Rabbi Dara. Personal Interview.
Hertzman, Rabbi Rachel. Personal Interview.
Perlmeter, Rabbi Rex. Personal Interview.
[28] Perlmeter, Rabbi Rex. Personal Interview.

Kaddish

The ritual of saying Kaddish Yatom, the prayer for the dead, was a piece of the Jewish mourning ritual that seemed to really resonate for the clergy with whom I spoke. For some, it was the simple act of having something they needed to do, and for others it was the act of being surrounded by community while saying it. In my conversation with Rabbi Rich Agler, he described Kaddish as "very powerful and affirming"[29], which felt in contrast to other prayers for him. A common sentiment was the idea that the structure of Kaddish was very helpful, especially at the beginning when the loss was very fresh. Rabbi Billy Dreskin describes the importance of the ritual of Kaddish.

> Ritual comes along at a time when you don't know what to do with yourself, when you don't know how to grieve and these specific instructions come and give you something to do. I appreciated going to temple on Friday nights, because I needed to go to say Kaddish. I don't know if it did anything other than that, but it did that, so it was important to me.[30]

Rabbi Dreskin was not working in the period after his son's death, but every Friday night he would go, as a congregant, to his synagogue to say Kaddish.

Rabbi Maurice Lamm, in his book "The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning", describes Kaddish from a traditional perspective and how it might help the mourner.

> Besides the concepts found in the Kaddish, the very words offer implicit comfort. Because of the accentuation and repetition of the positive thoughts of life and peace, these values become impressed on the bewildered and those with saddened hearts. It transfers, subliminally, the fixed, inner

[29] Agler, Rabbi Richard. Personal Interview.
[30] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.

> gaze of the mourner from the departed to the living, from crisis to peace, from despair to hope, from isolation to community.[31]

For many of these reasons, mourners find the practice of reciting Kaddish to be meaningful as they mourn their loss.

For Rabbi Rachel Hertzman, the power of feeling like a mourner in her community was one of the benefits of many of the Jewish rituals she experienced, including Kaddish.

> Initially I was much more tuned into the community surrounding us, in terms of support, in terms of shiva, in terms of when we were at the funeral or shiva services at our home, or going during that first year to say Kaddish. I was much more connected with the meaning of being a mourner within a community.[32]

Rabbis are often on the other side of the mourning process, so for Rabbi Hertzman, the experience of saying Kaddish during her first year of mourning was enlightening for her. It helped her to understand the embracing feeling of being a mourner in her community.

Rabbi Rex Perlmeter had not ever been someone to say Kaddish traditionally, but losing his son prompted him to adopt this practice of a traditional daily Kaddish recitation. Saying Kaddish until the unveiling was a meaningful way for him to mark time. “The fog broke around November, we’d had his unveiling. The unveiling was important and it kind of led to ending the year of Kaddish in that we were all committed

[31] Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 147.
[32] Hertzman, Rabbi Rachel. Personal Interview.

to moving on into life."[33] Marking the end of the period of saying Kaddish was a signifier that it was time to move toward living again after intense grief.

Shiva

Shiva was by far the most lauded of the Jewish rituals among this group of clergy. Each person was in awe of the flood of support that came their way, and the period of shiva was when they deeply felt that support. Again, there is a lot about this time that felt foggy because of the grief, but the piece that the clergy seemed to remember was how loved they felt. As Rabbi Rich Agler put it, "the big black hole never gets filled, but the shiva helped replenish a little."[34] This sentiment was consistent throughout the experiences that clergy shares about this period of time. Rabbi Billy Dreskin explains the power of the shiva period.

> I found the seven day memorial candle to be something, I don't know what it was. I was just glad it was there. Glad? I don't even know if glad is the word for it, but it needed to be there. Every day it was still there, every day we were still in shiva...On the seventh day that memorial candle went out and that was a super powerful moment. Because I think it represented us surviving this ordeal. We weren't out of the woods but we made it through the first week. Judaism really got it right with shiva.[35]

The consistency of having the memorial candle lit during shiva reminded him that although they were experiencing deep grief, they were surviving. When they got through the seven day period of shiva that was a signal to them that they would be okay.

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[33] Perlmeter, Rabbi Rex. Personal Interview.
[34] Agler, Rabbi Richard. Personal Interview.
[35] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.

Shiva is one of the rituals that has roots in the Bible. The Book of Job is known for reading like an alphabet of woe. Poor Job cannot seem to catch a break, and suffers loss after loss. In the beginning of the book Job finds out that his children died in a terrible accident, and he rips his clothes, throws himself on the ground and worships God.[36] We then learn about the response of his friends.

וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת	רֵעֵי אִיּוֹב אֵת כָּל־הָרָעָה הַזֹּאת	When Job's three friends heard about all these calamities that had befallen him, each
הַבָּאָה עָלָיו וַיָּבֹאוּ	אִישׁ מִמְּקֹמוֹ אֱלִיפַז הַתֵּימָנִי	came from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite,
וּבִלְדַּד הַשּׁוּחִי וְצוֹפַר הַנַּעֲמָתִי וַיִּוָּעֲדוּ יַחְדָּו לָבוֹא	Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and
לָנוּד־לוֹ וּלְנַחֲמוֹ: וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֶת־עֵינֵיהֶם מֵרָחוֹק וְלֹא	console and comfort him. When they saw him
הִכִּירֻהוּ וַיִּשְׂאוּ קוֹלָם וַיִּבְכּוּ וַיִּקְרְעוּ אִישׁ מְעִלֹּו	from a distance, they could not recognize
וַיִּזְרְקוּ עָפָר עַל־רָאשֵׁיהֶם הַשָּׁמָיְמָה: וַיֵּשְׁבוּ אִתּוֹ	him, and they broke into loud weeping; each
לָאָרֶץ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְשִׁבְעַת לֵילוֹת וְאֵין־דֹּבֵר אֵלָיו	one tore his robe and threw dust into the air
דָּבָר כִּי רָאוּ כִי־גָדַל הַכְּאֵב מְאֹד:	onto his head. They sat with him on the
	ground seven days and seven nights. None
	spoke a word to him for they saw how very
	great was his suffering.[37]

From this account we get several of the traditional customs around shiva. The mourner sits low to the ground for a week with torn clothing, as friends come to pay their respects and keep the bereaved company, but they do not speak until the bereaved speaks to them directly. Many of these traditional customs are still performed today among traditional Jewish circles. However, of the liberal clergy I spoke to, the most preserved piece of this tradition is sitting shiva for 7 days with friends coming to visit.

Cantor Ellen Dreskin describes how cared for she and her family felt during this time.

[36] Job 1:20
[37] Job 2:11-13

“It’s not like I remember much about the week of shiva, but what I know is from beginning to end I feel as if, from the minute we made the first phone call to somebody with the news, we did not lift a finger.”[38] Between their very closest friends and the synagogue, their community fully and completely took care of everything. All the family needed to do was walk downstairs and food was out, and people were there to see them. This sense of being so taken care of, is something that Cantor Dreskin kept coming back to again and again. Shiva was the first time when they truly felt the full embrace of the community that was there to hold them up.

Rabbi Dara Frimmer ended up reinventing shiva to fit what she needed in the moment. She spoke incredibly powerfully about how she did that, and what it meant for her grieving process.

> I have a lot of friends who are rabbis who live in LA who offered to do shiva minyanim, and in the formal time when you would normally do shiva, I just wasn’t ready to do it. Because I couldn’t imagine...I didn't lose faith in God or tradition or people, but I wasn’t feeling a love towards anything that was traditional Jewish grieving. So I started to let people come in two or three hour chunks to visit. It sort of became a house of shiva over several weeks, but it was not congregants. I was really not having congregants over because of boundaries. But that let the grief in slowly and the telling of the story again and again. It was so important to have people say to me, ‘I heard every word of that story and you did nothing wrong and your dream of having a family is not over.’[39]

Rabbi Frimmer really needed the concept of shiva, but not in the time that Judaism dictates. So she created her own version of it. She spread it out over several weeks,

[38] Dreskin, Cantor Ellen. Personal Interview.
[39] Frimmer, Rabbi Dara. Personal Interview.

and she only had a few people at a time, instead of a house-full. In a culture where congregants tend to look to their rabbis for permission when it comes to Jewish ritual, she was able to give herself permission to Jewishly grieve the way she needed to.

Particularly poignant is when Rabbi Frimmer describes telling the story to people over and over again as an important part of her grieving process. This is consistent with grief literature.

> Telling the story of this loss over and over - it's like we're looking for an alternate ending. A loophole. Some way the outcome might have changed. Could still change. Maybe we missed something. If we can only get the story right, none of this would be happening.[40]

There are so many clear benefits of shiva; specifically spending time with people who love you after you have experienced a tragic loss. Rabbi Frimmer wasn't yet ready to share her story in this way during the shiva, which is why it took her a little longer to create that opportunity for herself.

Rabbi Billy Dreskin shares an unexpected benefit of shiva- being able to comfort some of his congregants. He found this to be an incredibly meaningful part of the shiva experience.

> I ended up comforting a lot of people. Really beautifully, some families brought their children, and in some cases young children. And the children were so sad that Rabbi BIlly's son had died, and I'd reach out and I'd hold them, and tell them it's gonna be okay. And some people thought that it was terrible that I had to comfort others but of course it was

[40] Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK*: *Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand,* 71.

> wonderful. The genuine emotion that was shared, that elicited that response for me, that was really nice, to not have to always be the recipient of the comforting.[41]

While perhaps some might not want to be in the position to comfort others about the death of their child, Rabbi Dreskin experienced this as very powerful. To be able to share this genuine emotion with some of his younger congregants was a nice change from the constant receiving of condolences. David Kessler writes about the power of sharing emotion in this way.

> We need a sense of community when we are in mourning because we were not meant to be islands of grief. The reality is that we heal as a tribe. There is no greater gift you can give someone in grief than to ask them about their loved one, and then truly listen. When we see our sorrow in the eyes of another, we know our grief had meaning. We get a glimpse, maybe for the first time since the loss, that we will survive, and a future is possible.[42]

In the faces of these children who were sad about their rabbi's son dying, Rabbi Dreskin saw that his grief had meaning, to put it in Kessler's terms. While it was comforting on one hand to be comforted by friends, family and congregants, it was also comforting to see genuine sad emotion in others' eyes, and to see that it echoed his own. In a way, they were able to comfort each other. Rabbi Dreskin was comforted by the mirroring of his emotion and by the act of comforting, and the children were comforted by the presence of their rabbi.

Other Jewish Rituals

[41] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.
[42] David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief,* 47.

There are some alternative Jewish rituals that some clergy members found meaningful at different points along their grieving process. Cantor Ellen Dreskin had begun a practice before Jonah's death that ended up being a great asset to her in her grieving process.

> I had gotten myself into the habit of saying Modeh Ani for a good year before Jonah died, so it was really a habit. And then I wake up the morning after Jonah died and the first thing on my brain is Modeh Ani, of course quickly followed by nothing I can articulate. Eilu v'eilu.[43]

Even in the most difficult time in her life, she was able to wake up the next morning and thank God for being alive. This Jewish ritual gave her gratitude in a dark time, and helped her to hold them both together.

Another ritual that is Jewish, but perhaps not traditional, was one that Rabbi Dara Frimmer and her family adopted. She shared that at some point after Jack's death they added an extra tea light to their practice of lighting Shabbat candles, specifically in memory of baby Jack.[44] For their family, it is a way of incorporating his memory into their weekly practice, and keeping him close.

The next chapter will deal with ways in which clergy grieved publicly and privately in the aftermath of the death of their child. Many of the rituals that I touched on here, I will continue to explore further as I look at what it means to grieve as a public Jewish figure.

[43] Dreskin, Cantor Ellen. Personal Interview.
[44] Frimmer, Rabbi Dara. Personal Interview.

Chapter 3

Clergy as Public Figures: How They Grieve Privately and Publicly

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[45] and Abraham Lincoln[46] have experienced such losses, and have had to continue on with their role, as the public looks on. For many grieving people, it is enough to just wake up and get through the day, let alone having others watch them mourn. Most of grief is internal, Megan Devine explains, especially early on in the process.

> Much of the work of early grief is done inside your heart and mind, not in outward actions. That you have no idea what day it is, or can't remember when you last ate, makes perfect sense. It's in those lost, seemingly unproductive sections of time that your body and mind are attempting to integrate your loss: it's almost like an awake sleep cycle. Your mind goes off-line so it can heal.[47]

Many of the interviewees described this stage of grief- not being fully aware of what happens from moment to moment, and simply existing until it is time to eat or sleep and do it all over again. They were very clear that this loss felt separate from anything they had learned professionally. It felt almost irrelevant that they were trained to help others through something like this. That paled in comparison to what it was like to experience it themselves. Rabbi Rachel Hertzman explains this feeling:

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[45] Amber Phillips, "Joe Biden's Heartfelt Speech on Grief," The Washington Post.
[46] "Death of Willie Lincoln," Abraham Lincoln Online..
[47] Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*, 127.

> Any of the training that we got in terms of working with other people, when it's your own thing, that's just not even relevant. It has nothing to do with it ,and I was very aware that it had nothing to do with it. I know what to do with other families, and to a certain extent I knew what to do with helping my own family, but the training that I had, had nothing to do with it. It was not in any way clinical or professional. That was out the window.[48]

The experience that Rabbi Hertzman is describing is not unique to clergy. David Kessler, the author of *Finding Meaning*, has been studying grief his whole life, and still was not prepared for the death of his 21-year-old son. He writes, "This was a loss so shattering that despite all the years I'd spent helping others through their grief, I didn't know if there was anything that could assist me through my own."[49] There is a common humanity in this kind of tragic loss; no matter who you are, no matter what your background, it is devastating.

Some clergy either intentionally or unintentionally adapted strategies for moving through their grief. Many of these are not unique to clergy; you do not have to be a clergy person, for example, to find writing therapeutic in the wake of a loss. However, I will argue that there were aspects of these practices that they experienced specifically *because* of their clergy experience.

Personal Grieving Beyond Ritual

Writing

[48] Hertzman, Rabbi Rachel. Personal Interview.
[49] David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, 7.

Several rabbis in particular talked about the therapeutic nature of writing as they went about their grieving. It seems to make sense; part of the rabbi's job is to take current events or whatever is going on in their life, and find meaning in it, attempt to make sense of it in words. Megan Devine writes about the value of this outlet during grieving.

> Pain, like love, needs expression. The human mind naturally goes to creative expression: it's the way we're built. We are storytelling creatures. We look to art and to story, to help us make sense of the world, especially when what's happened makes no sense...We need the creative process to bear witness to our own reality - to reflect our own pain back to us. In a world that so often doesn't want to hear your pain, the page or the canvas or the sketch pad is always a willing companion.[50]

Many clergy turned to this method of grieving because it was something they knew how to do already. Writing as a process was something they had practiced; it was not a new skill to be learned. For those rabbis who talked about writing, there were different stated purposes, even if the end result ended up being the same.

Rabbi Phyllis Sommer started a blog when Sammy was still alive, during his battle with cancer. Initially, it started as a logistical solution- there were many people who wanted to be updated on how his treatment was going, and this seemed like an efficient way to do that. She could write about that day one time, and many people would see it. She also was aware that as a parent *and* a clergy person, she had a unique perspective to share.

> I had taken classes on teaching children about death and dying, I had counseled people through, not quite this, but I did

[50] Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*, 151

> my CPE at Children's Hospital in Cincinnati and I sat in a room with a family after their child was brought in and had died, so I always felt like I had a little bit more understanding than other parents around so I could see all the potential stuff, so I think that was part of the motivation to do the writing too.[51]

The idea that she could potentially help other parents who were going through what she was, served as an additional motivation to write. She felt, because of her status as a rabbi, and the training and experiences she had, served as an added layer that other parents did not have. She described going through each day and thinking 'that's what i'm going to write about' and sitting down at her computer that night to write. It became not only a method of communication, but a practice.

As can often happen with social media, it snowballed. Between the Sommer family's rabbinic and familial networks, they were also closely connected to the URJ Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute (OSRUI) Camp community. This led to many people around the country and the world being tuned into Sam's journey through Rabbi Sommer's blog.

> My kids are really used to being public property no matter what...They're clergy kids, so they get that. At camp everyone knows who they are, at the synagogue they can't misbehave. Everybody knows who they are and what was going on. But I knew that as we started into this, something different was happening.[52]

This is when her private process of writing to inform her family and friends of Sam's battle with cancer became public, more so than anyone had anticipated.

[51] Sommer, Rabbi Phyllis. Personal Interview.
[52] Ibid.

Rabbi Sommer continued to write after he died, first to inform everyone that he had passed away, and then writing to try to process her own grief. In the years since Sam's death, she writes less and less, as her grief becomes less acute and more a feeling that she just lives with. As Megan Devine writes several times in different ways- "Grief is not a problem to be solved; it's an experience to be carried."[53] She, and many others, use whatever they can to move through the painful, acute grief, but it will always be something they carry with them.

Rabbi Billy Dreskin also found meaning in writing. Unlike Rabbi Sommer, his son's death occurred suddenly so his writing only started after his son died. Similar to Rabbi Sommer, Rabbi Dreskin's writing began to serve a logistical function and then turned into a way to process his grief.

> Knowing that [Rabbi] Jeffrey [Sirkman][54] was going to have to write a eulogy, and that I was going to have to share memories of Jonah, and knowing that I don't have such a good memory, I took a piece of paper, folded it and put it in my back pocket, and anytime a memory came to mind, I wrote it on the piece of paper because not only did I want to have it available for Jeffrey, but I wanted to have that memory forever. Because I knew eulogies, not every memory gets used and the memories are probably going to continue. So I carried that piece of paper for a month. After a month, I moved to the computer. This is really really an important part of my grieving, informed by eulogies and what rabbis need to write good eulogies. That really kicked off my curatorship of Jonah's life. I have not only collected my own memories, but I've collected other people's memories. Whenever someone writes something that captures a moment in his life, it goes passing

[53] Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand.*
[54] Rabbi Dreskin's best friend and the officiant of Jonah's funeral

> by on a Facebook feed, I copy it and I put it into a document so I have it. And I have like 200 pages, single spaced pages, of just memories. And then, there are all the essays that I've written. That is how I've grieved. To collect that stuff, to fight against him disappearing. And sharing it online...I'm a person who works with words, and who takes life experiences and who tries to turn them into meaningful lessons. And maybe I can do that with Jonah.[55]

At first, he just needed to have some memories of Jonah to contribute to a eulogy, so the writing began strictly for that purpose. Once he moved to the computer and began to really document and "curate" memories about Jonah, it turned into an exercise in creating meaning out of his loss. This was his personal way of grieving. The piece of sharing it online, with the world, that came a bit later.

Group Therapy and Counseling

Several clergy talked about the experience of either group therapy or professional counseling to get them through this time. Rabbi Allenberg and Rabbi Frimmer both found group sessions to be vital to their grieving process. Rabbi Frimmer describes how important this was for her:

> That is a whole experience where if you can get bereaved parents in a room with other bereaved parents, it's a game changer. The level and depth of understanding and compassion and the ability to give language, where most people don't even have language to name why this feels so devastating...That's a huge piece. From a minute you get a positive pregnancy test, you've given names, you've charted out what the next 30 years of your life are going to look like.[56]

[55] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.
[56] Frimmer, Rabbi Dara. Personal Interview.

For Rabbi Frimmer, this bereavement group was an important space for her to grieve. Not only was it separate from her life as a public figure, but it also helped her feel seen in her pain, in a way that only people who had gone through the same thing could.

The Compassionate Friends is an international organization that provides local support groups for families who have experienced the loss of a child. This organization was founded when a chaplain brought two bereaved families together and realized that the support they offered one another was more powerful than anything he could provide. An excerpt from their mission statement explains this power beautifully.

> We need not walk alone. We are The Compassionate Friends. We reach out to each other with love, with understanding, and with hope. The children we mourn have died at all ages and from many different causes, but our love for them unites us. Your pain becomes my pain, just as your hope becomes my hope. We come together from all walks of life, from many different circumstances. We are a unique family because we represent many races, creeds, and relationships. We are young, and we are old. Some of us are far along in our grief, but others still feel a grief so fresh and so intensely painful that they feel helpless and see no hope. Some of us have found our faith to be a source of strength, while some of us are struggling to find answers. Some of us are angry, filled with guilt or in deep depression, while others radiate an inner peace.[57]

The power in feeling seen and heard by other grieving families who are also experiencing pain from losing a child is immense. While love and support from loved ones was also described as being incredibly helpful, there is a uniqueness in seeing

[57] "Mission Statement," Compassionate Friends, https://www.compassionatefriends.org/mission-statement/.

oneself in another's pain that can be healing. "That's the power of acknowledgement: it comes up beside pain as a companion, not a solution. That's how we get through this, side by side with other devastated, broken-hearted people. Not trying to fix it. Not trying to pretty it up. But by telling the truth, and by having that truth witnessed, acknowledged, heard."[58] This is something that a bereavement group can uniquely provide.

Others sought out individual counseling. Rabbi Michael Sommer shares that he and his wife Rabbi Phyllis Sommer saw a counselor together for a little while, and then he continued for a few years after they stopped going together. They both reported being very aware of the risks of a marriage splitting up after losing a child. Research shows that bereaved parents can experience a decline in marital intimacy, higher stress levels, generally assume a negative world-view, and are more likely to exhibit symptoms of depression and alcohol abuse.[59] Although the divorce rate among bereaved parents has been recently disputed[60], they wanted to pre-empt this risk by going to counseling. Studies on parental grief support this, showing that parents who have access to psychological support were more likely to work through their grief.[61] The Sommer family also sought out counseling for their other children.

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[58] Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand,* 222.
[59] Torkild Hovde Lyngstad, "Bereavement and Divorce: Does the Death of a Child Affect Parents' Marital Stability?," *Family Science* 4, no. 1 (2013): pp. 79-86, https://doi.org/10.1080/19424620.2013.821762.
[60] The divorce rate among bereaved parents is much lower than is often cited.
When Children Die: Improving Palliative and End-of-Life Care for Children and Their Families (Washington, D.C.: The National Academy of Sciences, 2003).
[61] Ulrika C. Kreicbergs et al., "Parental Grief After Losing a Child to Cancer: Impact of Professional and Social Support on Long-Term Outcomes," *Journal of Clinical Oncology* 25, no. 22 (January 2007): pp. 3307-3312, https://doi.org/10.1200/jco.2006.10.0743.

A few of the clergy described the benefits of having a change of scenery in the aftermath of the death of their child. There were varying reasons as to why being in a different space was beneficial to them.

For Rabbi Allenberg, he and his wife lived in Dallas, TX at the time of their daughter Sophia's death, and it was simply too hard to be there for them because of the plethora of young families. They ended up splitting their time among the homes of family members in other cities to get away from that.

> Part of our grieving was spending time in Scottsdale, AZ...one of the reasons we liked being there- not a lot of kids, a lot of old people. Not a lot of strollers. Dallas, TX: filled with babies, parks, and family events. It was too much...I went hiking every day for the first 4 months. I woke up and would go hike for 2 or 3 hours in the desert…We would do a stint in LA, a stint in Scottsdale, with little trips in between.[62]

There are two important pieces here. The first is being in a city without a lot of children around. It was simply too triggering for him to see other kids around Sophia's age, or even older, because she would never grow to be that age. Dr. Nisha Zenoff in her book "The Unspeakable Loss" describes this painful experience and the feelings it can bring up for grieving parents:

> The pain of your child's death can be reignited simply by the sight of other children, of what for you is missing. The parents of these children have what you do not, and that does hurt. The whirl of feelings evoked by the sight of a mother holding her daughter's hand or a father and son picking up some groceries at the market can be intense. Longing, anger, sadness, jealousy.[63]

[62] Allenberg, Rabbi Adam. Personal Interview.
[63] Nisha Zenoff, *The Unspeakable Loss: How Do You Live After a Child Die?*, 110.

It was this feeling that Rabbi Allenberg was trying to avoid by leaving Dallas, and spending more time in other cities like Scottsdale. The second important piece about his change of scenery was being able to be in nature for a few hours every day. These two things provided a healing combination for him. Rabbi Allenberg also took a trip to Hawaii during the time they both took off work. They felt closer to Sophia there, he shares. Being outside everyday and connecting to nature helped them to connect with her, as well as not feeling the pressures to socialize, which had been painful for them during this time.

Rabbi Perlmeter and his family also felt the need for a change of scenery. For several years they had been thinking about getting a second home in the Berkshires, but were planning on doing that further down the road. Shortly after Mitch's death close friends called them and told them that a place in their complex was for sale.

> We came up and we walked in and Nate [their youngest child] took one look at this unit and he said, 'we're buying this.'...and that was it. We knew that this is where we would do our healing. That summer in particular at Tanglewood, I cried through every concert, and that crying is very healing, I believe. And our friends, the people who love us, gave us space for that to happen.[64]

That phrase- 'we know that this is where we would do our healing' says it all. They needed a place in nature, separate from the life they knew in New Jersey to heal from this tragedy together, and this home was it. They had not originally intended to purchase a place this early, but the space resonated so deeply with each member of the family, so they knew they needed it at this particular time.

[64] Perlmeter, Rabbi Rex. Personal Interview.

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. Many RK’s have written about this. Rabbi Jordie Gerson, writes about the experience, saying, “When I became a bat mitzvah, the whole congregation attended the ceremony and kvelled, and when my paternal grandmother died, our shiva house was full for days.”[65]In the situation of the death of the child of the rabbi when there are other children, like everything else in the rabbi’s life, the other children are on display, in a way. The families who had other children at the time of their child’s death made some conscious decisions to make sure every member of their family had room to grieve in the way that worked best for them.

When Rabbi Dreskin started writing, he showed his family what he was doing. 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 4 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.[66]

[65] Jordie Gerson, “How Being a Rabbi's Kid Is Like Being a B-List Celebrity,” https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/how-being-a-rabbis-kid-is-like-being-a-b-list-celebrity.
[66] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.

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.”[67] 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 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.[68]

Both she and Rabbi Rex Perlmeter talked about the blessing of their very close nuclear family. At times their different styles of grieving were actually challenging for the family. Rabbi Perlmeter expressed his grief and sadness in many ways, and crying was one of them, as described in an earlier vignette. 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.

[67] Dreskin, Cantor Ellen. Personal Interview.
[68] Hertzman, Rabbi Rachel. Personal Interview.

Support from the community

When the clergy did grieve publicly, the support that they felt from their congregation and community was overwhelmingly warm and embracing. Every single clergy person 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.

For the clergy who were trying to manage their child's illness leading up to their death, as soon as anyone at the congregation learned about it, they wanted to help. When Rabbi Allenberg's daughter got sick, the synagogue was incredibly flexible with him.

> 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.[69]

While we would hope that every job would be flexible with an employee when something like the illness of a child strikes a family, not every workplace can afford to do that. Furthermore, not every workplace is values-based in the way a synagogue is; a place that holds itself to Jewish values would want to support a member of their community in whatever way they can, especially their clergyperson.

[69] Allenberg, Rabbi Adam. Personal Interview.

> 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.[70]
>
> 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 shiva...I felt a little self-conscious because most people don't get this kind of care, not like this.[71]
>
> 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.[72]
>
> Mitch died on February 1st 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 girl friends, and she drove her 5 hours. Dropped her off, and drove back. That's the kind of support that we had then.[73]
>
> 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.[74]

These anecdotes reflect the support that the clergy received from all directions: friends, family, congregants, strangers, colleagues and the institutions they served. People

[70] Sommer, Rabbi Michael. Personal Interview.
[71] Dreskin, Cantor Ellen. Personal Interview.
[72] Sommer, Rabbi Phyllis. Personal Interview.
[73] Hertzman, Rabbi Rachel. Personal Interview.
[74] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.

dropped everything to be present for these clergy members 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...our house was filled with people from all of those different parts of life as well as our own friends.[75]

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

[75] Hertzman, Rabbi Rachel. Personal Interview.

experienced this care did not have to lift a finger. Rabbi Billy Dreskin speaks about how powerful and helpful this was, not only at home but also at work.

> 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.[76]

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 did not expect their clergy to return to work until they were ready. Rabbi Dreskin talks about the flexibility of his congregation- he shares that they did not ask him one time when he would come back. They let him take his time, and he decided when he was ready.[77] There were in fact, some who were even encouraged by their colleagues 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

[76] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.
[77] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.

> days' and her [senior rabbi] saying, 'you really don't have to, you don't have to be there.'[78]

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 would not be able to be on the bimah for high holidays, which was a hard pill to swallow.

Challenges of being a public figure

While the clergy experienced overwhelming love and care from their synagogues and communities, there were certainly 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 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.[79]

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 have helped.

[78] Frimmer, Rabbi Dara. Personal Interview.
[79] Richard Agler, *The Tragedy Test,* 141.

Rabbi Agler is expressing a similar sentiment to that of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai when he lost his son. In 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 Tankah 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.[80]

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."[81] 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.

[80] Avot D'Rabbi Natan 14
[81] Ibid.

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 another potential pitfall- the pressure to role-model grief. Although this could have been a challenge for them, they didn't succumb to 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.[82]

That was echoed in their decisions about shiva. They only had shiva at their house, and did not 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 would not 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 Allenberg expresses pain in making the opposite decision- in doing a shiva at the synagogue which ended up being incredibly painful for him.

[82] Dreskin, Cantor Ellen. Personal Interview.

> I think we did one shiva 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.[83]

A number of factors contributed to Rabbi Allenberg's sense that holding one day of shiva at the synagogue had not been the right decision for them. Congregants were able to 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.

Rabbi Dara Frimmer worried that she was letting 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.[84]

[83] Allenberg, Rabbi Adam. Personal Interview.
[84] Frimmer, Rabbi Dara. Personal Interview.

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. Therefore, she internalized this focus on her pregnancy, and felt 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.[85]

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 did not 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 grieving rituals, taking their role as rabbi into consideration. Each clergy person experienced different amounts and kinds of pressure to grieve in a particular way, and each handled it differently. All clergy

[85] Frimmer, Rabbi Dara. Personal Interview.

felt touched and overwhelmed by the flood of support, and chose to handle that support in different ways.

Chapter 4

Reckoning with God and Faith

> I was angry. Man, I was angry. … I was a practicing Catholic at the time, but I was mad at God, oh man. I remember being in the [Capitol] Rotunda walking through to get the plane to get home to identify — uh, anyway — and I remember looking up and saying, 'God.' I was talking to God myself: 'God, you can't be good. How can you be good?'
> - Vice President Joe Biden referring to losing his wife and 13-yr old daughter, in a speech on losing a loved one and coping with grief

Entire books have been written on the subject of this chapter- how do we grapple with our faith when bad things happen to us?[86] How do we make sense of it? Religious or not, it is natural for humans to question the idea of a loving God in moments of deep grief and crisis.[87]

Carrie Doehring, in her book "The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach" writes about how individuals in crisis grapple with their theology, asking the question- why?

> Everyone who has grappled with deep losses and experiences that threaten their physical and emotional well-being has faced the challenge of making sense of such suffering. People in crisis initially raise questions and make laments, like "why is this happening to me?" Their first attempts at answers come out of their embedded theology, out of the theological presuppositions that shape their lives and practices….In contrast, deliberative theologies are

[86] Rabbi Harold Kushner's book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* was written following the death of his son, Aaron.
[87] Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*, 44.

> deliberately thought out….When people become aware of their embedded theology in the midst of a crisis, they often go through a process of evaluating their beliefs and constructing news ones. As they do this, they are engaging in deliberative theology.[88]

In other words going through the "tragedy test"[89] forces people to re-evaluate what they always thought they knew about God. This is especially true for clergy, who live their lives as a public figurehead for the divine. As Jack Bloom notes in his book "The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar", the rabbi is held on a pedestal above the congregants, and is considered to be connected to God in a special way.[90] Even for rabbis who have studied theology, who help congregants through their own wrestling with God, an event as traumatic as the loss of the child can monumentally change their faith. Or perhaps the opposite could be true; clergy have spent so much time thinking about God and working on their faith, perhaps their faith is unshakeable.

I quickly discovered that much like every other part of the grieving process, there was a range of responses among the clergy I interviewed on this topic, mostly revolving around their view of God's role in the world today. However, one thing that I found in common among the accounts from these clergy was that it was rare for someone to ask the question, Why? More common for them was to ask the question, How? Not how did this happen, rather how can I move on? How can I possibly continue living when my child has left me? This is, in fact, quite a Jewish approach. The text that we read on

[88] Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*.
[89] The title of Rabbi Rich Agler's book in which he grapples with his faith after the sudden and tragic loss of his daughter.
[90] Jack H. Bloom, *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar: By the Power Vested in Me,* 136.

Tisha B'Av, our day of mourning for the destruction of the Temple and commemoration for similar acts of destruction and loss, is The Book of Lamentations, Eicha. The very name of this book means how, not why. This is what this chapter will continue to explore- clergy exploring the "how" of their theology.

As Rabbi Rachel Hertzman began to grapple with the death of her son Mitch, she did not focus much on God, rather she was simply trying to get through every day.

> I didn't get angry right at first...I was not angry with God and I was not blaming of God, and I was not unable to pray or process...At first I kind of went through the motions, and I also too quickly wanted to integrate this loss into my greater narrative, but it takes more than a little bit of time to get there. So I just kind of worked on surviving and being okay and taking each day and I wasn't really focused, probably in the first couple of years, on the God part of that very directly.[91]

Rabbi Hertzman's immediate grief did not leave room for grappling with God, which only came later in her grieving process. Gradually, she began to re-open up to God.

> Either out of necessity or some kind of different awareness, my God concept has broadened into my not needing to carry everything and being supported by something greater. At the time of Mitch's death I don't think that was going on. That has opened up much more for me in the ensuing years.[92]

Once she had moved through the most difficult part of her grief, she was able to feel held by God, or more generally to feel a divine presence. Her connection with God actually deepened as she began to contemplate and process Mitch's death.

[91] Hertzman, Rabbi Rachel. Personal Interview.
[92] Ibid

Cantor Ellen Dreskin had an almost opposite experience in that she had done a lot of work to cultivate her connection to God before her son passed away. So much so that she felt deeply grateful for her commitment to prayer and spirituality, and in recent years before Jonah's death, for her connection with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality.

> I give that experience so much credit and gratitude; that was part of my scaffolding. I couldn't articulate it at the time but I was entirely aware of how I may have reacted differently to Jonah's death had I not gone through that experience and I was immediately grateful...I was so grateful that I had no crisis of faith. I had done my wrestling with God, and continued since on different levels. But at least on that front, that this wasn't God in that way, I was real secure in that and I was so grateful that I had done my work before I needed to, and I still am.[93]

Cantor Dreskin's faith, her focus on cultivating her personal spirituality and connection with the divine was a tremendous asset to her grieving process and helped her to continue to feel constant gratitude in her life, despite her loss.

Although it is certainly not a requirement for couples to have matching theologies, Rabbi Billy Dreskin expresses a similar sentiment: the idea that God was not responsible for the death of their son. Rabbi Dreskin is of the belief that God does not have control over human events, and therefore a sudden death is a random event, a result of chance. Rabbi Billy Dreskin credits such a theology to his lack of anger about Jonah's death:

> The reason I was never angry with God was because I never gave God that power. I never believed in a God that would strike down a 19 year old in the prime of his life. I never believed in a God who was that cruel, and who played that big of a role. For me, God's role in the universe was to spark The Big Bang and I wake up every morning grateful that that

[93] Dreskin, Cantor Ellen. Personal Interview.

> happened and everything else has evolved from that moment.[94]

For Rabbi Dreskin, God does not have such a big role in the lives of humans, to be able to cause such a catastrophic event as the death of his 19 year old. This theology actually provides him comfort; in not allowing God to have the power of causing his son's death, he is able to continue a relationship with the divine.

Rabbi Dreskin's reaction is similar to that of the biblical character, Job. Towards the beginning of the book, Job finds out his children have died. He rips his clothing, cuts off his hair and prays to God. The most striking piece is Job 1:22 where the biblical author tells us:

בְּכָל־זֹאת לֹא־חָטָא אִיּוֹב וְלֹא־נָתַן תִּפְלָה לֵאלֹהִים׃

Despite all that, Job didn't sin, or give reproach to God[95]

The prefix "ב" has many possible translations, including in, on, with, etc. The translation offered here, "despite", highlights the cognitive dissonance. After all of the sadness he is sure to have, he *still* does not blame God; even after all of this, or *despite* all of this, he does not sin or give reproach to God.

Although we know that sometime after shiva Job does express some anger[96], that anger is also not explicitly directed toward God.

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[94] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.
[95] Author's translation of Job 1:22.
[96] After the seven days and seven nights in which Job sits on the ground in silence, we read that Job begins to speak and curses the day he was born. The verse begins with "אַחֲרֵי־כֵן", meaning "after that" or "afterward", which makes the exact time is unclear.

Within the same theology but expressed in a different way, is the idea that God does not have the capability to intervene in our lives, but that when things go wrong, it is okay to be angry at God about them, even if we know that God was not the cause. Rabbi Adam Allenberg shares this sentiment:

> I was already very much in a place, and have been for quite some time now, where I don't believe God interacts in our life. I have no evidence, so I didn't go into this thinking, 'If I could just get everyone to say Mi Shebeirach, we've got a fighting chance.' It doesn't mean I don't appreciate people saying Mi Shebeirach, I believe there is an effect to it. I just don't believe that it's healing.[97]

Rabbi Allenberg was forced to confront the mortality of his daughter when she became sick a little after her first birthday. He did not believe that God had anything to do with whether Sophia would live or die. However, after her death, he did feel this sense of impassioned anger at God; not because he believed that God had caused it, but because it was somewhere to direct his anger.

> One of things I've always loved about Jewish thought that was very comforting to me, is I do have a conception of God, and that conception allows me to be furious and angry. I'm allowed to yell at God and accuse God of committing an atrocity. And that theology not only permits it, it kind of encourages it. Some of our most vaulted figures in life: Chana as a model of prayer- she's asking God but she's also giving it to God...it's a much more impassioned plea.[98]

While Rabbi Allenberg cognitively understood that God did not cause his daughter's death, it was helpful to him to yell and rage at God, to express his anger to whatever force in the universe caused him to experience this loss. This sort of internal conflict-

[97] Allenberg, Rabbi Adam. Personal Interview.
[98] Ibid.

being angry but also knowing there is not anyone to be mad at, is a common part of grief, as Maurice Lamm reminds the mourner:

> We the survivors, who do not accompany the deceased on their journey into the night, are left alone staring into the black void. There is a rage of conflicting emotions that seethes between us: bewilderment and paralysis, agony and numbness, guilt and anger, fear and futility and pain- and also emancipation from care and worry.[99]

With grief comes a panoply of mixed and conflicting emotions, and we need an outlet to express these emotions. There are many ways that grieving people might go about this; expressing rage at God is one way to do it.

Rabbi Rex Perlmeter has spent a lot of time writing and teaching about his experience grieving his son and its impact on his theology.

> Neither my professed or my operant theology, at least in my adulthood, has been of a puppetmaster God, if you will...I believe that God is imminent in the entirety of the universe, and I believe that the universe is structured in such a way that human beings, all things physical, material, have built into them mutations and seeds of corruption that lead to unhappy outcomes for us.[100]

Similar to other clergy who expressed the idea that God does not control the bad things that happen in our world, for Rabbi Perlmeter, God is present in this world but is not a "puppet master." Therefore, his overall theology was not directly affected by his son's death, rather he simply connected to God differently in the immediate aftermath.

> In those months it was very hard to connect directly with God. The first connection was the love that surrounded us and the

[99] Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, 1.
[100] Perlmeter, Rabbi Rex. Personal Interview.

> sense of a human internet...people were saying Kaddish with us around the world and we felt so held. And not being able to access the sense of being held by the divine, it was the divine through [them]. Rami Shapiro's translation of Ahavat Olam[101] had always been one of my favorites before then, and after that it became almost like my theology. Those were the hands and the smiles and the tears.[102]

Rabbi Perlmeter's connection to God was through the people in his family's life who offered their undying support while he and his family needed it the most. He experienced God as caring for them through their loved ones. Connecting to the divine in this way got Rabbi Perlmeter through the most difficult months of his grief, until he was able to make his way toward connecting to God in the ways to which he was accustomed, like prayer.

Clergy are not only responsible for their personal theology and prayer life, they are also often vehicles for making God's presence known to their congregants, which is especially challenging. For those clergy who eventually returned to work and had to use God language and share their theology with congregants, and especially kids, it was remarkably difficult.

Rabbi Phyllis Sommer is a clergy person who will openly admit that she does feel anger towards God, or as she puts it, is not "on speaking terms with God"[103], so coming back

[101] See Appendix 2
[102] Perlmeter, Rabbi Rex. Personal Interview.
[103] Sommer, Rabbi Phyllis. Personal Interview.

to work and talking to children about God created some tension for her between what she felt, and what she thought she should tell them.

> I lie a lot about God. At first I couldn't pray, I wasn't interested in those words anymore and I would say that I wasn't on speaking terms with God and I still say that. But I realized that in order to give my children and other people's children their own way to God, I needed to stop saying that I had this huge issue with God. And I would say here is what some people think about God and here is what other people think about God...I have figured out how to say things about God that don't feel completely in opposition to how I feel...I am even still not sure what my own relationship with God is, but I have found my way back to finding comfort in our rituals.[104]

Rabbi Sommer struggled to find a way to share her true beliefs while also encouraging each congregant to find their own way. She figured out that she could not continue to lie about God; she decided to be true to herself, which in turn served her congregants by showing them that there are many different ways to relate to God.

However, there is not always a compromise that is feasible. Even after Rabbi Dara Frimmer returned back to work, she was unable to be on the bimah for the High Holy Days:

> I missed high holy days that year. It was just too raw and too close, and it was an example of: I was not going to hold my shit together upon a stage for X number of hours talking about Happy New Year! Dear God, there's nothing further from the truth.[105]

[104] Sommer, Rabbi Phyllis. Personal Interview.
[105] Frimmer, Rabbi Dara. Personal Interview.

For Rabbi Frimmer, it would have been too painful, and inauthentic to preach messages of a happy, healthy and sweet new year, when she was not feeling that any of those things were true in her life. What our tradition was offering, in the form of Rosh Hashanah, was too cheerful to resonate with her deeply painful grieving space.

Rabbi Rich Agler wrote an entire book, *The Tragedy Test*, about how the loss of his 26-year old daughter tried his faith. The book recounts Rabbi Agler's wrestling with God and different theologies as he comes to terms with how he could continue to have a relationship with the God he thought he knew.[106] He exemplifies the process of forming a deliberative theology, and describes how the theologies he has "tried on" throughout the process resonate with his understanding of his daughter Tali's death. In a particularly poignant passage, he writes:

> It became painfully clear that God protects neither me nor my loved ones- nor anyone else, for that matter- from random harm. This is true no matter how many ritual formulas we utter, be they superstitious or prayerful. The God with whom I will maintain a relationship is not a God who took my daughter because I missed a keine hora[107], or some similar petition, somewhere along the way. To imply that either repeating certain formulas or failing to do so, was somehow connected to our tragedy is completely unacceptable. No God of justice and mercy can act that way.[108]

When we humans begin to try to reckon with why things happen the way that they do, it is inevitable that we reckon with our long-held world views or meaning structures. For these clergy and others with a religious faith grounded in a belief in God, reckoning with

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[106] Nearly the entire book relates to this chapter, and it's a compelling read for anyone who is interested in reading about a rabbi working through his personal theology in the aftermath of a tragedy. As he relayed to me, writing the book was a large part of his grieving process.

[107] Keine Hora is a Yiddush phrase that is a reference to the evil eye, and Jews say it in the hopes that it will prevent bad things from happening to them and their loved ones.

[108] Richard Agler, *The Tragedy Test*, 72.

God and faith is part of the process. If one wants to continue to believe in a just and merciful God, it is impossible to also believe that God would cause innocent children to die. This is at the root of what these clergy struggled with, or ended up coming to terms with, as they processed their loss. There is no why when it comes to tragic death for any of these clergy. Cantor Ellen Dreskin eloquently shares her take on this:

> To this day I have never asked why. Why us? Why me? Why now? Why Jonah? These questions are totally useless to me. My immediate reaction is this happens to people all the time. Every second of every day. This and much worse happens to people all the time.[109]

Rabbi Michael Sommer similarly expresses the existence of "Illness and death is the ultimate proof that there is no fair. There is blessing, there is grace, there are miracles, but there's not necessarily fair."[110] The sentiment in the words of both of these clergy people is that there is no rhyme or reason to who gets sick and who dies. These are crazy-making questions, and even crazier-making potential answers. Rabbi Sommer continues, saying, "It just gets to that eternal question of: you study Torah every week- is there really an act of God? Is God punishing me?...Is God punishing the child? Dangerous questions and you can't really go there."[111] As we read the Torah every week, we see a God who punishes and a God who rewards, so it is natural for clergy, who engage deeply with Torah to begin to question whether the death of their child is some kind of punishment.

[109] Dreskin, Cantor Ellen. Personal Interview.
[110] Sommer, Rabbi Michael. Personal Interview.
[111] Ibid.

The death of Aaron's sons is one example of God taking lives as punishment for their wrongdoing. We read:

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי־אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מַחְתָּתוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֵן אֵשׁ וַיָּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קְטֹרֶת וַיַּקְרִבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם:	Now Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Eternal alien fire, which God had not enjoined upon them.
וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמֻתוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה:	And fire came forth from the Eternal and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Eternal.
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן הוּא אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה ׀ לֵאמֹר בִּקְרֹבַי אֶקָּדֵשׁ וְעַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָעָם אֶכָּבֵד וַיִּדֹּם אַהֲרֹן:	Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Eternal meant when God said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people." And Aaron was silent.[112]

The traditional interpretation of these verses suggests that God did not approve of the way that Nadav and Abihu carried out the offering, so God killed them on the spot. They made a mistake with fire and therefore were killed with fire.[113] Bahya comments on this verse, stating that it was not only that they had sinned against God by performing the offering incorrectly, it was that they made the miracle of heavenly fire descending seem less impressive, or important, therefore causing a desecration of God's name. The punishment fit the crime- the same fire that they used "against" God, is the one that consumed them. Of course there is a question here of how or why were Aaron's sons deserving of this harsh punishment? They made one mistake and they were killed on

[112] This translation is taken from sefaria.org, and slightly altered. All places where the translation said "the LORD", I translated it as "the Eternal", and all places where it said "He", referring to God, I translated it as "God".

[113] Chizkuni, a 13th C rabbi who based his work in Rashi, specifically notes this in his commentary.

the spot? Bahya suggests that perhaps God needed to make a spectacle out of them because they showed mistrust of God in front of all the Israelites who were present.

We could perhaps suggest that this biblical, punishing God is not the God who we pray to today. Several rabbis made reference to this theology.

> If we really had a biblical God that punishes us for everything we did wrong, forget it, we'd never make it through a week, so I try to balance it with so much gratitude.[114]

> I am comforted to know that I live in a consistent universe. That the laws of physics are not violated...But also because of these laws of physics my son is dead...What I know is that his body got hit and it got hit hard enough that because we human beings are fragile, his life ebbed away, and I accept that. It doesn't make me happy, but I accept that. That's a law that applies to all of us equally. So I'm not bitter at a God for picking on my son.[115]

The last sentence might lead a reader to believe that he believes that God *did* pick on his son. However, the tone with which he expressed this particular comment, in conjunction with the previous statements Rabbi Dreskin made about God, make it clear that he does not believe that God picked on his son. He was simply using a phrase that one might use if they truly believed that a death was the fault of God.

In the above quotes, Rabbis Sommer and Dreskin both address this idea that the death of their child is entirely separate from God, and that blaming God is both illogical and unhelpful to them in their process. While, as we saw with Nadav and Abihu, we have a biblical God who punishes people who do things wrong, we do not necessarily hold that

[114] Sommer, Rabbi Michael. Personal Interview.
[115] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.

same image of God today. Or perhaps, it is still the same God, who just operates differently.

David Kessler, a grief expert mentioned in the last chapter, writes specifically about parents' grappling with God after the death of a child.

> Maintaining faith in a benevolent and personal God, one who watches over you and assists your well-being, can be especially difficult when you're aggrieved by the terrible injustice of your child's death. You may find the image of a loving God impossible to reconcile with what happened to your child.[116]

None of these clergy talked about holding this idea of a personal God. This, arguably, made their God-grappling a little easier. They still had to accept the tragic deaths of their children, deaths that were indisputably awful, but they did not have to reconcile with God the way that might have if they believed in a personal God.

However, there is still some grappling that needs to happen; In his book, Rabbi Richard Agler sums up his process of engaging in deliberative theology beautifully.

> My faith in the God who is just, kind, and true was longstanding. This was the God I prayed to, spoke about, and did my best to serve. I believed that people who were faithful to this God would receive blessing. When asked to account for life's inevitable injustices, I always acknowledged that there were things that did not add up. There would always be matters we did not understand and questions we could not answer. That was an honest response as far as it went. Now its shortcomings were greater than I could accept...The death of our daughter tested the faith I had lived, professed, taught, and attempted to exemplify, as nothing before.[117]

[116] David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: A Sixth Stage of Grief,* 70.
[117] Richard Agler, *The Tragedy Test*, 10.

For some, faith in God was not tested by the death of their child; for others this was an impossibly hard test of faith. Either way, their loss truly caused them to think deeply about the presence or absence of their faith. After such a profound challenge, none of these clergy emerged unchanged.

Chapter 5

Moving Forward

While Jewish tradition sets aside specific grieving milestones, there is no telling when someone might be ready to return to work, and begin to move back into a functional life. The expectation that anything will be "normal" again is rejected in the literature; after the loss of a child, that is not a realistic expectation. "Recent research on parental grief has found that full return to the life one had before a child's death, free of sadness, is not a realistic or helpful goal...a deeper understanding of grief allows us to see recovery as a lifelong process."[118] The clergy I spoke to were all at different points in their grieving process, and had gone through various stages of moving back into a life that was more sustainable than the intense grieving period they had once been in. There were several large hurdles to jump, including returning back to work, being able to perform funerals, and just living with their grief in general. For some, their loss also impacted the way they did their jobs going forward.

David Kessler, an expert on grief, and a co-author with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross on their book *On Grief and Grieving,* wrote his own book about a sixth stage of grief: *Finding Meaning*. He himself lost a son and writes about both his research, and his personal experience.

> In this sixth stage we acknowledge that although for most of us grief will lessen in intensity over time, it will never end. But if we allow ourselves to move fully into this crucial and profound sixth stage - meaning - it will allow us to transform grief into something else, something rich and fulfilling...We want to find meaning. Loss can wound and paralyze. It can

[118] Nisha Zenoff, *The Unspeakable Loss*, 42.

> hang over us for years. But finding meaning in loss empowers us to find a path forward.[119]

This chapter is about how the clergy found that path forward, and were able to make some meaning from their loss.

Returning to Work

Rabbi Adam Allenberg had already taken 5 months off of work before his daughter died. Her illness resulted in many hospital stays and he took the time off to be present with her. He describes the process of thinking about going back to work.

> And then [I took off] through shloshim and on the last day of shloshim I said, 'I can't do this, I can't go back..I've already been off for almost 5 months, who's to say when I'll be ready to talk to anyone again?' And that was it. So I packed up my office, and I left.[120]

Rabbi Allenberg could not imagine going back to work anytime in the near future, so he decided to leave the congregation. This decision was also informed by his absence for the previous five months; he had been through so much, for so long, that he needed to take time to figure out what was next for him.

At the time of Rabbi Rachel Hertzman's loss, she was working on a couple of Intro to Judaism courses part time, so she did not have a congregation to contend with. For Rabbi Hertzman, the return to work felt very natural.

> It was not even a question- should I shouldn't I? It was very organic- when I'm ready I will start working again. And I was also completely supported by the people I was working

[119] David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief,* 2
[120] Allenberg, Rabbi Adam. Personal Interview.

> with...After 6 weeks, because of the nature of the things I was doing, I felt ready to get back into it. I didn't have the experience of a constituency to console while I was going through my grief.[121]

To her benefit, Rabbi Hertzman was working with other rabbis and Jewish professionals at the time who did not hesitate to give her the time that she needed. She mentions that she felt ready to go back to work "because of the nature of the things [she] was doing." Perhaps because she was not doing congregational work with people who would need counseling after their losses, and because her work was part time, she felt ready to go back after 6 weeks. She implies here that perhaps had she been working with congregants, it might have taken her longer to feel ready to take that step.

Rabbi Billy Dreskin, who was a congregational rabbi at the time of his loss, also returned to work after 6 weeks. In contrast to some of the other experiences that have been described, he was eager to spend time with children. His congregation was not so sure.

> When I came back, I think it was after 6 weeks, they were all terrified about how I would be in front of children. They were all terrified, I guess of me scaring the children and the first thing I wanted to do was be with the children, because you know, there's life. And the first thing I did was I came into religious school t'filah on a weekend and I brought Jonah's acoustic guitar and I used the guitar as an opportunity to talk about what had happened, about what this all meant and about my desire to hang onto the wonderful memories and this guitar is the wonderful memories. It's important not to hide death from kids.[122]

[121] Hertzman, Rabbi Rachel. Personal Interview.
[122] Dreskin, Rabbi Billy. Personal Interview.

Coming back to work, and beginning to share about his loss and who Jonah was, helped Rabbi Dreskin begin to find some meaning in Jonah's death. Finding meaning does not mean that there is anything good or positive about the loss, rather it means that in order to move forward and live, the mourner has to create some meaning out of the loss. That is what Rabbi Dreskin did and continues to do with his writing, and that is what he did on that first day back at work, teaching the children about who Jonah was.

Rabbi Phyllis Sommer went back to work after shloshim, although it was hard for her to imagine being a rabbi again.

> I didn't go back to work for awhile. We made it through shloshim and then I was like, okay I guess I should go back to work...I remember saying to a friend, "I'm never going to be able to do these things again, how is that going to happen? And she said, "You've been a rabbi for 9 years, you have a lot of muscle memory for how to do all that stuff, you're gonna switch on the autopilot and do the rabbi stuff until someday you do new rabbi stuff, and it's going to be okay." And she was right, that's exactly how it felt.[123]

For Rabbi Sommer, she had to spend some time going through the motions, before it felt genuine for her to be back at work. This lines up with the research, as David Kessler explains, that the first year of the loss tends to hold very intense grief and mourning. After a year, the grief fluctuates.[124] Therefore, it makes sense that Rabbi Sommer had to go on autopilot for a while before anything new kicked in; she was still intensely grieving.

[123] Sommer, Rabbi Phyllis. Personal Interview.
[124] David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief.*

Rabbi Frimmer talks about the impact that her grief had on the staff. In fact, her worry about this caused her to take 6 weeks after her loss, so that the staff at the synagogue did not have to be in the presence of her intense grief.

> On a staff level, it's really hard to be grieving authentically, and to recognize that you're not able to do what you used to do. And so one logical outcome of hard grief is taking a sabbatical...therefore people don't have to be in the presence of so much grief. That's really hard on a team...Coming back to work, starting again with Bar Mitzvah families, leading services, not doing preschool Tot Shabbat right away, was this whole process of realizing oh I don't have it all together. So I did cry with congregants who really did want to support.[125]

Even when she did return to work, Rabbi Frimmer was surprised at how many moments triggered her. She intentionally took longer to return to Tot Shabbat, and even B'nei Mitzvah celebrations were hard. She shared a story about her first Bar Mitzvah back to work, specifically recalling the parents' words for their child. Rabbi Frimmer sat in the front pew to witness this powerful moment between parent and child, and the parent begins, "On the day you were born…." She sat there in deep emotional pain, thinking about the life that baby Jack would not get to lead.

Funerals and Consoling Families

For Cantor Ellen Dreskin, the care that she received during her grieving process, deeply impacted the way she thinks about relating to people, both in general, and specifically in mourning. The way that her loved ones treated her changed what she thought she knew about being there for people in difficult moments.

[125] Frimmer, Rabbi Dara. Personal Interview.

> Anybody said yes to anything that we said, they just said yes. All of this left an indelible mark on me in terms of relating to people in general...you have to go through this in the way that is healthiest for you, is a message I want to give to people when people say “well I know we’re not supposed to X.” Just say yes because they need you to just smooth the way as much as possible to go through this really tumultuous time.”[126]

Because every way she wanted to grieve was met with a “yes”, she learned how important this was. Going forward, she wants to help others grieve in this same way- doing whatever they need to do. This translates to her belief that it’s important for each family member to grieve in the way that works best for them. They all had to do things their own way, and were given the space to do so, so this is what Cantor Dreskin hopes and wants for others. Megan Devine identifies this as a healthy approach to grieving.

> You can’t force an order on pain. You can’t make grief tidy or predictable. Grief is as individual as love: every life, every path, is unique. There is no pattern, and no linear progression.[127]

The comparison that Devine makes here is exactly what Cantor Dreskin talks about- her loss helped her realize how individually we need to process and go through anything and everything we encounter.

Rabbi Dara Frimmer had a similar realization in the aftermath of her loss, and explains the contrast between her perspectives before and after losing baby Jack.

> I had done a lot of death and dying work...I probably operated too much from a clinical pathway. As in, ‘I’m listening to what

[126] Dreskin, Cantor Ellen. Personal Interview.
[127] Megan Devine, *It's Ok That You're Not Ok: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*, 31.

> you're saying as someone who's in grief, and I'm now going to insert advice and words'. Now it's more of listening, acknowledging, and saying 'that's absolutely right. It's as bad as you're saying it is. It is that heartbreaking, there may be nothing worse, and I'm here with you.' So I think I do that much more often because that's what people did for me.[128]

In voicing this contrast, Rabbi Dara Frimmer highlights the way in which her style of pastoral care changed. After her loss, Rabbi Frimmer moved more to a modality of listening and validating and did not try to offer words of advice, knowing that this is what worked best for her when she was going through it. Her words are also echoed in Megan Devine's perspective. She writes, "When you are broken, the correct response is to be broken. It's a form of spiritual hubris to pretend otherwise."[129] In Rabbi Frimmer's approach following her own loss, she allows her congregants to be broken, and does not try to fix it.

Rabbi Michael Sommer describes a unique type of care that he received. A large portion of his work continues to come from officiating at local funerals, and so his care was from the funeral directors who he has come to know well.

> The funeral directors, once I started back at work, haven't stopped giving me work for 7 years. That's how they know how to take care of me. Keep me busy, be able to see me by working with them so they can check in, see how I'm doing.[130]

[128] Frimmer, Rabbi Dara. Personal Interview.
[129] Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*, 51.
[130] Sommer, Rabbi Michael. Personal Interview.

Although at first funerals were difficult for Rabbi Sommer to do, he finds it meaningful to help families through their loss, and feels grateful that the funeral directors who he has known for so long, continue to refer families to use his services.

He also described how losing his son changed the way he approached families who had experienced a loss.

> Not that I wasn't always gentle, but I think I have a real extra level of gentle because I get it. It's not that I didn't get it, I became a rabbi because my dad died when I was 23, also from Leukemia, so that's sort of a "life is really not fair"...I'm a little more empathic and empathetic, and we're able to become family within minutes...I don't necessarily let them know "oh I got someone over there" but I'm always aware.[131]

His loss as a young adult influenced him in a significant way; it led to his rabbinate. His loss *during* his rabbinate influenced the type of rabbi he wanted to be going forward. He talks about being able to "become family within minutes" with families who are going through loss, because he has been so intimate with that feeling throughout his life. Rabbi Sommer and his wife buried their son Sam in a cemetery near their home where Rabbi Michael Sommer often officiates funerals. He likes to visit Sam's grave whenever he's there. This is what he means when he says "oh I got someone over there."

For Rabbi Phyllis Sommer, it was hard to officiate at funerals after Sam's death. This was especially true when two families in the congregation lost children to cancer, and Rabbi Sommer helped with officiation at those funerals.

[131] Sommer, Rabbi Michael. Personal Interview.

> We've had two other kids die of cancer since Sam's, we've done both of them, I'm on the bima for both of them, really under duress. Like I had to be there for these two families because I had been there all along, and I couldn't not, but I couldn't believe I had to do it again. Same room, same size funerals.[132]

Because Rabbi Sommer had been through a similar ordeal personally, she felt called upon professionally to be there for these families. She acknowledges that it would have been hard to bow out of that, but it was hard for her just the same, given that she was still grieving her own son who had died from cancer as well.

Living with Grief

Grieving does not take a finite amount of time. Many scholars and authors on this topic acknowledge that grief over a tragic loss, however that is defined, is something that people live with for the remainder of their lives.[133] Each of the clergy who participated in this study has a different path with grief, and therefore still feels its effects at times, regardless of how long it has been since the death of their child.

Rabbi Adam Allenberg describes his experience, which is perhaps a common one that a grieving parent might go through for many years after their child's death.

> Our niece is 4 months older than Sophia, and even now it's hard because I think, 'you're supposed to have a playmate, and not be bossing around my kids, but have someone your age.'[134]

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[132] Sommer, Rabbi Phyllis. Personal Interview.

[133] Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*, 79.
David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief,* 31
Nisha Zenoff, *The Unspeakable Loss: How Do You Live After a Child Dies?,* 42

[134] Allenberg, Rabbi Adam. Personal Interview.

The dynamic between his kids (he and his wife had two kids after Sophia died) and his niece triggers a response of “this isn’t right”, and makes him miss his deceased daughter who he feels should be there. This is a piece of living with grief that perhaps will linger for many years.

It has been 11 years since the Dreskin family lost Jonah and Cantor Dreskin feels like she is mostly at peace with her grief. When asked the question, “where are you in your grief now?”, she actually laughed, because she was physically sitting in Jonah’s old room that she has since converted into a home office. She works in this home office, sometimes thinking of Jonah, but not regularly feeling the grief she felt early on. She explains this to illustrate where she is in her grief now.

> I have to say, I’m done. I’m not done because it is a journey and I think the response to life for me that was triggered by Jonah’s death will be playing itself out in my life until I die, and I don’t know how. I can tell you that Yahrzeit feels different every year...In terms of deep sorrow and grief, I’m okay.[135]

What Cantor Dreskin is saying here is that she knows that Jonah’s death will always be a part of her, but she is not in a stage of acute grief, and has not been for a while. After 11 years, she acknowledges that she will always miss him, but she does not feel the constant grief and sadness that she used to feel. She referred to his Yahrzeit feeling different every year, because every year her grief is a little bit different.

[135] Dreskin, Cantor Ellen. Personal Interview.

Rabbi Michael Sommer describes a similar sensation, when he says, “Now it’s just a smaller grief, not pounding at the gates.”[136] He, too, is referring to living with a constant sense of grief that will always be there, but not the enormous pain that he felt at the beginning of his grieving process.

Rebuilding the Family

For some families, moving forward meant either having more children, or helping their other children cope with the death of their sibling. In either case, there is a question of how to involve the deceased family member in their current lives in a way that honors their memory but does not keep the family living in the past. While talking about their child might be painful, the research shows that the more that families talk, the better off their mental health is, and the healthier the marriage is.[137] Nearly every clergy person shared that it was important to them to keep their child’s memory alive in their home.

For both Rabbi Frimmer and Rabbi Allenberg, the child they each lost was their first, so they both had to figure out how to share about their child who had died, with their subsequent children. Both rabbis share that it feels pretty organic. Rabbi Allenberg takes his children to go visit Sophia.

> We take them to her grave regularly. Rather than explain to them why it happened, we just talk about her...We’ll say today is Sophia’s birthday, that’s why we’re going to go visit her and we’re going to have a cake. And they’ll say ‘okay!...They follow our lead and don’t seem to be uncomfortable. They’re just really compassionate to us about her.[138]

[136] Sommer, Rabbi Michael. Personal Interview.
[137] Ulrika C. Kreicbergs et al., “Parental Grief After Losing a Child to Cancer: Impact of Professional and Social Support on Long-Term Outcomes”.
[138] Allenberg, Rabbi Adam. Personal Interview.

The Allenberg family has found a way to integrate Sophia into their lives, and to, together with their children, celebrate her short life. Rabbi Allenberg emphasizes how important it is to talk about her, even if it is hard, because he does not want her memory to disappear. For Rabbi Frimmer's family, there is a similar sentiment. In the chapter about Jewish ritual, I shared her custom of lighting an extra candle in honor of baby Jack. She shares a story about how her twins brought up baby Jack recently.

> It makes sense to them now as they get older too, like my dad died many years ago so they know Zayde Dan died and baby Jack died and Sophia died[139], so they have this vocabulary of "this thing happened." So every once in a while they'll ask a question..around Lag Baomer their teacher was trying to explain to them Shimon Bar Yochai and being buried in the cave, in sand, and something around the words "buried" and "cave" made them remember that people when they die are buried in the ground and so we got into a whole conversation of "buried in the mountain", "buried in the ground", "Mama does funerals", "I have to bury someone" and then they said 'Where's baby Jack?" And I was like "Oh, cremation, dammit. How do I explain that we burn a body?" I don't remember how I got out of it, but they were trying to figure out: what are the routines and rituals?[140]

There is a lot to unpack in this story around clergy families. Clergy children are consistently exposed to death when their parents are regularly officiating at funerals, so death is already presumably a normal topic in their household. In Rabbi Frimmer's family, they have created an environment in their home where talking about baby Jack is normal.

[139] Rabbi Allenberg and Rabbi Frimmer are very close friends, as are their families, so Rabbi Frimmer's kids know about Rabbi Allenberg's daughter Sophia.
[140] Frimmer, Rabbi Dara. Personal Interview.

The Sommer family is in a different situation; all of their children were alive when Sam died. As was the case for the Dreskins and the Hertzman/Perlmeter family, each member of the family went through grief in their own ways, but they all feel that it is important to keep their deceased loved one alive in their home and their hearts. Rabbi Michael Sommer shares that they share a story about Sammy at least once a week. They do not sit down and say "okay, it's time to tell a Sammy story now", rather, it comes up naturally in conversation. The family has always used humor as a coping mechanism, and this is no exception. Rabbi Sommer shares a particular story of one time in the last few years when they could not find the Apple TV remote. They looked everywhere- in the couch cushions, under the couch, around the room, and could not find it. A couple weeks later, a friend of one of their kids was over, and reached into the couch, feeling something, and pulled out the Apple TV remote. The reaction of the Sommer family was- "good one, Sammy."[141] The thought that Sam is playing jokes on them, and is still a presence in their home is a comforting one, and one of the ways that they keep his memory alive.

Just like there is no "right" way to grieve, there is no one way to move forward after the death of a loved one. The ever-present reminder from Megan Devine stands true: "Some things cannot be fixed- they can only be carried."[142] Each of these clergy people and their families figured out and continue to work on the ways in which they can best

[141] Sommer, Rabbi Michael. Personal Interview.
[142] Megan Devine, *It's Ok That You're Not Ok: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*, 3.

live full, meaningful lives, knowing that life will never be the same after their loss. David Kessler quotes Rabbi David Wolpe who writes, “There is no magic answer to loss. Nothing, not even time, will make the pain completely disappear. But loss is transformative...The blessing we seek in life is not to live without pain. It is to live so that our pain has meaning.”[143] In returning to work, continuing to conduct funerals and console families, and living with their grief as they rebuild their family, these families are all finding ways to create meaning out of their loss.

[143] David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: A Sixth Stage of Grief*, 71.

Conclusion

While I was personally incredibly honored to receive and hold space for these meaningful stories that the clergy shared with me, I also learned quite a lot from this thesis, and in analyzing their experiences in light of both Jewish text and grief literature. Any conclusions that I have come to are based on the 9 interviews I conducted, and therefore should be taken as such.

In terms of the Jewish ritual that these Reform Jewish clergy observed during their grief process, they were very split on how meaningful those felt, and there was no clear conclusion about the power of these rituals. Several felt strongly that the rituals (saying Kaddish, sitting shiva, having a Jewish funeral, etc) were very powerful, and others had no interest in Jewish ritual following their loss. Those who felt strongly about the meaning of these rituals found their rhythm to be comforting- both the familiarity and feeling pulled to do something while they were in their deep grief. Those who were not interested in Jewish ritual were struggling to find anything particularly meaningful at that time, and specifically did not find significance in or affinity towards Jewish ritual or prayer.

However, it was clear that whether or not the Jewish aspects of shiva felt important to their grieving process, the outpouring of love and support that the clergy felt through sitting shiva (for those who chose to do that) was overwhelmingly positive and special. They felt incredibly supported, both by their personal networks, and by their

congregations. A few even noted that they received so much support that they felt self-conscious about it, acknowledging that not everyone gets this kind of care when they experience a loss. There was a shared sense that their communities really wanted to give back to them in their moment of need, in exchange for all of the times that their clergy had been there for them. Furthermore, they received care from their clergy colleagues, and many of them acknowledged the power of being on the receiving end of such deep, sincere clergy care from so many directions. This, certainly is a unique benefit of the clergy community, being close with so many people who know how to care for those who are grieving.

In addition to the care that they felt, and not to take away from that, they also experienced some challenges with boundaries with their congregants. These challenges, for the most part, were of no fault of the congregants, and were simply a result of the dynamic. Firstly, in wanting to be there for their clergy, many said the “wrong” things that they thought would be comforting, and ended up causing more pain than comfort. To be clear, many clergy felt that there was no “right” thing to say that would have been comforting, so it was tricky to navigate the congregants who really wanted to be comforting with words. Another challenge was in the expectations that some clergy felt from their congregants. Not all clergy felt this pressure, but for those who did, it was about things like sitting at least one night of shiva at the temple or having the whole congregation at a funeral. One clergy person even avoided having a funeral for this reason! Creating these boundaries between what felt like important

personal grieving and allowing the grieving to be public, was a challenge that they all faced.

One aspect of their grieving that really surprised me was that the clergy mostly felt as though God had nothing to do with the death of their child. Many of them voiced that they did not ask the “normal” questions of “Why me?” or “Why did God let this happen?”, that rather their belief in God indicates that God does not control these things. Many expressed that they had already done their wrestling with God and their personal theology, and therefore were pretty set on the idea that God was not involved for them in the randomness of their tragedy. Although there were a couple of clergy who expressed not feeling like praying to God in the aftermath of the death of their child, for the most part, God was not a part of their reckoning with the reality of their loss. I would suggest that this is an outcome that is unique to clergy. Because they have spent so much time thinking about God and their own personal theology, and have taught and guided others through this same process, they had already done their reckoning with God before they truly “needed” it.

Going back to work for this cohort of clergy was a mixed bag, although most ended up going back about 6 weeks after the death of their child. There were exceptions for clergy who were retired, or a couple who took longer than that. The most important learning from this area was that the clergy were given as much time as they needed, and not at all pressured to come back to work. That was incredibly valuable to them, and it was almost universally expressed that the support of and lack of pressure from

their clergy and synagogue colleagues was vital to their grief process. They needed to do this on their own terms, and decide for themselves when they were ready for re-entry. This luxury and this degree of sensitivity is not generally offered to members of other professions.

They almost universally felt as though their training did not prepare them for experiencing their own loss. That no matter how much they learned about grief counseling, it was useless when it came to their own loss. This was not a critique of their training, rather an acknowledgment that grief is a different beast when one experiences it personally. Furthermore, they tended to feel as though they do their jobs differently, in terms of pastorally caring for congregants around loss, in the aftermath of their own loss.

As I wrote this thesis, the Jewish texts gave me a more thorough background on where Jewish rituals around loss and mourning originate, and helped me to ground the clergy experiences. Most of all, these texts helped me to truly understand that the Jewish people have been grappling with loss since before we became a people. The various reactions of our ancestors to their own losses – Aaron's silence, Rabbi Yochanan's frustration, Job's anger – are reflected in the differing reactions of the modern clergy interviewed for this thesis. The texts provided the grounding reminder that was echoed throughout the interviews and the research- everyone has to go through their grief in their own way.

Overall, the positive impact of being a Reform Jewish clergy person when experiencing a loss came from the wide net of support that caught them at their lowest moment- their communities that showed up, and they were mostly allowed to grieve in the way they needed to, taking the time they needed. The other upside was the work that they had already done to reconcile and understand their relationship with God, so that there was not a lot of blaming of God that happened. One of the challenges of being a clergy person during this time of grieving was the pressure (often self-inflicted) of needing to involve the community and engage in rituals in a way that would please them.

Although all of the above learnings are significant, there are many areas still left for further study in this area, and many questions left unanswered. Some of them include: How (if at all) might these members of the clergy express different feelings and thoughts as their grieving processes progress? The clergy I interviewed were at different places along their grief journey, but I wonder what it would look like to follow up with these same clergy in a few years to see how any of their feelings have changed. How might clergy experience this differently depending on the nature of their loss (sudden or expected)? While I interviewed clergy in both of these categories, the size of this study was not large enough to come up with significant findings in this area.

Finally, a few additional questions for further study, beyond the scope of this thesis: How might these experiences differ among clergy who have experienced other types of tragic losses, like loss of a spouse, sibling, young parent, etc? How might the experiences and responses have been different if the clergy had been more traditionally

observant? I look forward to reading future studies that will address these important issues.

Appendix 1: The Questionnaire Template

Personal Grieving Practices

1. As you were anticipating this meeting, what were you aware of in terms of your feelings of having this interview?
2. Have you discovered or adopted any creative practices or other practices that have helped you in your grief? If so, what are they and (how) have they helped you?
    a. If any of them were done for a prescribed amount of time, how did you decide when you were going to stop doing it?
3. Did you choose to deliver a eulogy at your child's funeral? How did you decide to do that, as opposed to just being a mourner?
4. Where do you see yourself today on your grief journey?

Relationships with Others

5. How did your support system change in the aftermath of your grief?
    a. How did clergy colleagues (either at your congregation or otherwise) fit into this support system?
    b. Clergy who had similar losses? Did they reach out? Did you?
    c. Were you ever tempted to move into a clergy space with your spouse? Pastor your partner?
    d. Were there specific times when it was hardest to be there for your spouse during the grieving process?
    e. Did you seek out specific grief groups? Why or why not? If so, were they helpful, and how so?
6. How has your relationship with your other children been impacted?
7. (If it feels right) How has your relationship with your spouse been impacted by your loss?

Grieving and Work/Judaism

8. Which, if any, of the Jewish mourning rituals did you find comforting/helpful? How so?
    a. How were these rituals/services mediated by you being a public figure?
    b. Were you comfortable with all of the choices you made?
9. When did you find your time to be alone as a family with your grief? Did you have to carve it out intentionally?
10. The Jewish idea of a world to come- how does that resonate with you in relation to your loss?
11. What kinds of support did you receive from congregants that was helpful? Not helpful? How did you respond?

    a. Did you have the sense that congregants thought you knew how to mourn better than other people? Did these impede your ability to just be mourning parents?
12. Did you intentionally create boundaries for yourself for any period of time after your loss? If so, what were they and how did you go about it?

Appendix 2: We are Loved by an Unending Love

We are embraced by arms that find us
Even when we are hidden from ourselves.

We are touched by fingers that soothe us
Even when we are too proud for soothing.

We are counseled by voices that guide us
Even when we are too embittered to hear.

We are loved by an unending love.

We are supported by hands that uplift us
Even in the midst of a fall.

We are urged on by eyes that meet us
Even when we are too weak for meeting.

We are loved by an unending love.

Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,
Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;
Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;
We are loved by an unending love.

- Rami Shapiro
Taken from The Romemu Siddur

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