Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Recording Date: November 23, 2021
Last Edited: October 3, 2025

Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl

NOVEMBER 23, 2021

SUMMARY

Rabbi Buchdahl was born in South Korea and grew up in Tacoma. She describes her journey to become the senior rabbi at the Central Synagogue in Manhattan, NY. Rabbi Angela Buchdahl discusses the impacts of COVID-19 on her congregation, especially about virtual connectivity. She discusses her upcoming memoir.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Great.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Hello. It is Tuesday, November 23rd, 2021. This is Jeremy Ehrlich from the Washington State Jewish Historical Society. And I'm here today with Rabbi Angela Buchdahl. Rabbi, thank you so much for joining us.

Angela Buchdahl: Thank you. I'm happy to be here. My dad would be very upset that you didn't call me Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl. I meant.

Angela Buchdahl: To ask.

Angela Buchdahl: And use my maiden name, which is now my middle name.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Rabbi, my apologies to your dad. I'm going to pin you here. And we'll get started. I want to, I mean, of course, as of this moment, you do have a Wikipedia profile, but I wondered if you would talk us through your biography a little bit and starting with, where you were born.

Angela Buchdahl: I was born in South Korea. My father grew up in Tacoma, Washington, already a third Generation to Coleman, and ended up doing ROTC, which brought him and stationed him in South Korea. He met my mother there. They married, had two children. I'm the oldest, and my younger sister was also born in South Korea. And at about the age of five, my parents moved back to Tacoma, my dad's hometown. Our first apartment was literally across the street from Temple Beth El, which is the synagogue that I grew up in. And, I attended the same high school that my father attended, and his siblings, and most of my first cousins, and my grandfather before that. So, there was a real sense of rootedness in Tacoma. And while it was a relatively small Jewish community, it was very tight-knit, certainly in that time and my father's and grandparents' generation. And, I was welcomed when I came in from Tacoma, as was my sister and my Korean mother, and we felt like being a Warnick in Tacoma meant that we had. Yes. We were, um, you know, had a lot of family around, but also just had deep roots in the community. I loved that I could see on the wall pictures of my cousins on the confirmation page, and a picture of my grandfather in an ASA basketball uniform. So I grew up feeling very connected to my synagogue community and, um, became president of my youth group and, um, um, and bio chapter and, uh, and was the representative in my high school when I went to Israel at age 16 on the Bronfman Youth Fellowship. It changed my life. And I decided I came back from that trip and decided I wanted to be a rabbi, which was pretty shocking to both of my parents. And I also felt that I really wanted to go to the East Coast, where I had this very romantic idea of this Jewish community that was very close still to the immigrant experience, and that had a richness of Jewishness that was like oozing out on every street corner. New York kind of epitomized that for me. And so I ended up going to college on the East Coast. I studied religious studies at Yale and continued to go back to Israel a couple of times during my college summers, and then applied to rabbinical school soon after graduating. And, um, became both a rabbi and a cantor from Hebrew Union College. I worked in

Westchester, um, in Scarsdale, at Westchester Reform Temple for about a decade and got married, had three children, became a rabbi, became a cantor, and then in 2006, I moved with my family into Manhattan, where I became the senior cantor of Central Synagogue. And eight years later, I applied. When my predecessor retired, I applied to be the senior rabbi. I was named the first female senior rabbi of Central Synagogue, and it's at that time, a 175-year history. Central is now the largest congregation in New York, perhaps in one of the largest in the country, with a membership of about 2800 families. And, I'm in my 15th year here as senior rabbi.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Terrific. Thank you. I have written a couple notes and have a couple of questions that I want to just drill down a little. Do you think that the size of the synagogue has to do with your being the rabbi, is that something that's happened since you've become senior rabbi, or has this been a trend that has been ongoing?

Angela Buchdahl: So I was very fortunate that when I came to the congregation, it was already a very healthy congregation, that my predecessor came in, 20 years basically before I did, or maybe 15 years before I did. And he inherited a congregation that was somewhat broken. There had been a kind of proxy battle about pushing out the previous senior rabbi, and so the membership was down to 900 families, and it was not in good financial standing. And he helped grow it to be healthy. And when I came in, it was nearly 2000 families. And at that point, right in the year that was the first year that I arrived, they decided to cap the membership at 2000 families because it had already gotten so much bigger, doubling in size in the 15 years before with my predecessor. But then, um, when I became rabbi, we just took in everyone that was on our waiting list, and we immediately just moved our cap up to 2300 families. And since then, we have increased the cap to 2600 families, and we are just considering whether or not we'll move it up again, because we're basically already at 2800 families. And we do have a waitlist that is currently 800 families long. So it is, um, we've never had such a long waitlist. And I do think that much of this growth, we were already in a very strong position. But then I think that success sometimes breeds more success. And I think that we've been fortunate to be beneficiaries of people feeling very happy with their experience at Central and telling their friends. And, also our live stream has brought in a lot of people that, uh, surprisingly, a quarter of our current waitlist are people who don't even live in the tri-state area, 45% of our waitlist currently. Um, don't even don't live in Manhattan. So clearly, there is a kind of global reach that this synagogue is now having.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Yeah. Interesting. I'd love to hear a little bit more about your parents' reaction when you said you wanted to become a rabbi. Mhm.

Angela Buchdahl: So you have to understand that my mother basically had only met one rabbi in her life, and it was Rabbi Richard Rosenthal of blessed memory, the rabbi who I grew up with in Tacoma, who served our community for 41 years before he retired in his 60s. And, he was out of central casting. Rabbi Rosenthal, uh, a German refugee, um, at a young age, he had, like, a thick goatee, very, like, great, deep voice, you know, hair, like a kind of a bushy head of hair that looked like Einstein and hair growing out of his ears. And, he looked like a rabbi and sounded like a rabbi. And that was the only rabbi my mom knew. Um, she also knew that my experience once I left the bubble of Tacoma, Washington, where I was deeply embraced and known. Um, and my family was known that when I went into other parts of the Jewish community that I would receive much more questioning challenge, sometimes even outright rejection. So I think for my mother, not only was I not the picture of what a rabbi looked like, but she was concerned that I was setting myself up for a career where I would never be allowed to succeed, or where I would never be fully accepted. She said, You've got three strikes against you. You're a woman. Um, you've got a non-Jewish mother and you look Korean, she said, like, are you ever going to get a job as a rabbi? You could do anything. Why do you want to put yourself up for something so hard? I think that I stuck with it because, honestly, once I decided I wanted to be a rabbi at age 16, there was nothing else I wanted to do with my life, but I really could not shake this feeling that that was what I was meant to do. And, even though there were times I wasn't sure I wanted to be a part of the Jewish community, I was so upset and so hurt by it. I still didn't think of doing anything else with my life, so I was a little stuck. Maybe it was a failure of imagination, but because of that, I stuck with it. And even when I didn't know what was in store, and I was very fortunate, I had wonderful mentors. I had wonderful supporters along the way. And yet at the same time, the fact that I'm now rabbi of Central Synagogue in the middle of Manhattan is way beyond my wildest imagination for what I would be doing as a rabbi when I was a little girl growing up in Tacoma.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Interesting. Did you speak any Korean at home growing up?

Angela Buchdahl: Um, so it was the only language in the home until I was five. Uh, so I did not really speak any English when I was living in Korea. My father spoke some Korean to me, but when we moved to America, I only had about six months before I was starting kindergarten. So my parents kind of did an immersion English at home, and we only spoke English in the house. And that sort of remained aside from, of course, some, um, choice Korean phrases that my mom would continue to use mostly when she was upset at us. Uh, or words for foods, or like a few kinds of, you know, kee kee idioms. Um, there wasn't a lot of Korean spoken in the house. My mother helped bring a few of her sisters to Tacoma, and they were in our home, and we were in their home a lot, and they always spoke in Korean to each other. So there was a lot of Korean around the house that we heard. And for a long time,

when I was, especially when I was young, I understood all of it. Um, my Korean got a little bit more and more rusty as I got older.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha. So, Rabbi, one of the things that we're very interested in is capturing people's stories of the pandemic. Can you just tell us a little bit about what your synagogue has done? You know, in response to the pandemic and how that sort of, you know, we can talk more about how that's gone.

Angela Buchdahl: I was very fortunate that I came into a synagogue that anticipated the future and planned for a future that we did not yet know. So in 1998, there was a fire in the sanctuary here of Central Synagogue, and they rebuilt it completely and rededicated it in 2001. At the time. They wired the entire sanctuary for a future that they did not yet know. Um, what that meant, though, is that the synagogue was wired for live streaming, which we didn't start doing until seven years later, but we had the capabilities to do things like live stream, before we knew what it was. So I share that just because I think that's the ethos of the congregation to begin with. It's not just that we did it, but that there was a sense of like planning for a future. So when we started in 2007 or 8 to do live streaming, we just intended it to be for our community that was, homebound or in a hospital at the time, or maybe even traveling out of town, and the live stream was like a screen this big on your computer, and it was not particularly good view. And I was like, who would ever want to watch this? But then we brought in, a part-time AV director who, you know, got a new streaming service and got it to be a full-screen picture. Once it was a full-screen picture, he realized that it was not a very good quality. So then he bought us new high-definition cameras. So by the time we got to 2010, or 11, we were live streaming, and we had a pretty good little community of people that live streamed us. And, I would say by 2017 or 18, we started to realize that we were getting maybe tens of thousands of people watching us on the High Holidays from many different countries in the world. We became kind of a semi-destination live stream because it was not that many synagogues doing it at that time. What that meant is that when the pandemic happened, we already had a built-in audience and infrastructure to go completely virtual in a way that most synagogues weren't quite ready to do. And so we had an AV team that knew how to live stream. We already had 13 cameras in our congregation in our sanctuary set up for this. We already had teams set up to do alternate sites for live streaming so that we could run educational programs with that. And, we were really fortunate that there was a sense that that was already built in. The other thing we did for the High Holidays, we kind of decided early on that we were going to be fully live-streamed. And so we invested in even upgrading further to bringing in a production team for the High Holidays so that it could feel like there was an intimate experience. Um, ironically, you know, you bring in some of that stuff only to make it feel smaller and more intimate, not, um, bigger and grander. Um, and that was the feel. We wanted people to feel like they were in the room with us. And so, our live stream audience really grew exponentially. And that was both for our membership, but also for the larger Jewish community, in addition to just sort of sharing services, which we never stopped running services. There were periods of time when we're running them out of our living rooms. But, um, and then we started streaming out of our sanctuary to empty sanctuaries for many, many months. In addition, we realized that we had a lot of people who were home completely alone. We have a lot of single members in our community, and some older members who were not leaving their apartments in the early months of the quarantine and had no other human contact. So we realized we wanted them to have clergy touches at least once a day, if not more. So I started a daily meditation in the morning, thinking I was doing it for myself, so I would be accountable to meditating every day, because I knew I needed something to keep me grounded. And, before long, I had over 400 people meditating with me every single day, for five months, we did daily meditation. I eventually moved it to twice a week, and now I do it. I still have a very devoted following of people who have become meditators with me. And that has been a gift. We also started a clergy coffee every day, where at noontime, we would just have a short check-in. It was very informal. We'd have our coffee with us. We would do a little teaching or cook something in the kitchen with our friends and our congregants, or sometimes sing, sing some music. And, our cantor put on a whole musical show with his family of talented children. Uh, so there was a way that we said to our community, we're going to connect with you every single day. We actually literally also made phone calls to our congregants, um, all of them. So we made 2400 congregant calls to check in on every single member. We started with our older members first, checking in to see if they needed help with groceries. But we had a phone tree that many congregants were involved with, just to kind of check in on everyone. Um, so there were ways that we were making sure we were meeting people's needs. And because we weren't seeing people physically, we decided that we wanted to do a few things where they felt our they felt our connection physically. So we sent people Passover boxes of food because we knew it was hard for people to get to the grocery store, and a lot of people were eating their first Passover. They were eating completely by themselves. And it's hard to make a Passover feast for one. And so we created Passover boxes with meals, and gave out hundreds of those boxes to our congregants. Uh, we did a Hanukkah package as well with latkes and applesauce and sufganiyot, um, and candles and gelt. Um, and we also created some ritual objects for different holidays, just to have something physical that made them feel connected to others. And I think the thing that I felt most proud of was a portable ark that was a little light box that looked like our sanctuary, with the ark doors and some beautiful Jewish quotes on it. And you put your phone underneath the light box, and it lit the whole box up. And it was like having your own sanctuary in your home because, um, everyone's apartments and homes had to become not only where they lived, but also where they worked and also where they exercised, and now also where they prayed. And so in order to help transform people's apartments into worship space for the High Holidays, we sent them each a portable ark which helped them feel connected to their sanctuary, but also to each other, and help transform with the light, um, the space that they were in. So these

were among the many things that we did to try to connect with our congregants, to let them know we were with them so they could feel like some sustenance from us, some physical connection, some contact. Um, over these days of the pandemic.

Jeremy Ehrlich: How much of what you did to sort of sustain you, I mean, to pivot during the pandemic, how much do you think you're going to stick with? Uh, you know, once everyone's back to normal, assuming we get back to normal?

Angela Buchdahl: Yeah. I don't think that normal is going to be going back to what it was before, that's for sure. We're in an era now where a lot of places have really flexible remote work options. Now, um, a number of people, we already had a sizable number of people who were like snowbirds and flew to Florida for the winter. But now you're seeing more, um, kind of dual homes for people, maybe not just for a couple of months in the winter, but maybe for half of the year. Not just Florida, but Colorado. Uh, Connecticut. California. Um, we also just have a growing number of people who have watched us by live stream and want to be members, even though they will never live in New York and rarely set foot in Central Synagogue. And so we created a virtual membership called The Neighborhood. And so we have 500 households that are neighbors of Central Synagogue. And that was just in its first year of trying this out. We were overwhelmed by the response, um, to the neighborhood. And so what that means is forever and ever now we are going to have ways of connecting to Central Synagogue, regardless of geography. We are no longer bound in terms of connection or membership by the walls of the sanctuary and or this community house that we are in. And there is no question that while we are eagerly coming back to life in person for holidays and for services and for educational experiences and for religious school, and bar mitzvahs, all of that. Uh, we also have a sizable number of people who are joining us, by, you know, virtually, and will continue to do that and may never come to anything in person, ever. and that's going to be the way that they're connected to us. So we have to rethink what membership looks like. Um, we have to rethink what programming looks like. They're going to be some hybrid options, but they're going to be some all-virtual options, some all-real-life options. We're just experimenting with this now. And we also learned some things are just better virtual. For example, the meditation that I do in the morning it's just half an hour long. And it's not easy to get around the city. I don't think that a lot of people would show up if they had to physically come into the building for a half an hour meditation, and they, by the way, prefer many of them to have their mug of coffee with them and to be in their pajamas in the morning and to meditate on their comfy chair with a blanket on. And that makes sense. So, um, I will never do meditation, um, anything but virtually. We might do a meditation retreat at some point with all these folks who have been meditating. Um, might be in person, of course, but we've learned that some of these things lend themselves much better to being virtual all the time. And I think that from now on, it will always continue to be a part of how we do community building and learning.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Very interesting. Do you think this is an entirely new conception of what it means to be a Jewish community, or is it just sort of a continuation, but on a virtual level?

Angela Buchdahl: I think it's a little bit of both. I think that there is something new that's happening, boundaries that are porous in a way that we didn't fully expect. I was very dubious that a real community could be built purely virtually. But I've been proven wrong. Uh, we have a small group. A core group. We call them about 20 people whom we set up with each other to do a Havdallah once a week. And they started all virtually. They did not know each other. They're a completely eclectic group of different ages, different family structures, um, different sexual orientation, all sorts of. They're just like, not at all of a single demographic or affinity group. And this group has only met, you know, virtually for months and months and months. And they have become incredibly close and so much so that when we started to be able to be in person, they've actually started having Shabbat dinners together, and they sit together when they can at services. And not even all of them live in New York. Someone lives in Chicago, and a couple of them live in Washington, DC. Um, just this last Shabbat, they had a gathering in person at services, and then they all went out to Shabbat dinner together. So this proved to me that actually community is not just sustained virtually, but it can actually be created virtually. And that's what convinced us to try the neighborhood, because we realized that even people in far-flung places can support each other. So it is new. That being said, the things that people are seeking, the actual connection, um, it's old. It's as old as, like what people have always wanted, which is to be seen, to be held in their authentic selves, to be able to empathize with people, maybe across lines of difference. That's what community building is all about. And so, um, I think that in some ways that's, that's what human beings have always sought. So we're just doing it in different ways with new technologies.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Got it. Interesting. Thank you. Um, speaking of new things happening, your 2020 Yom Kippur sermon went viral. What's it? What's it like going viral?

Angela Buchdahl: Um, well, I was so moved and touched that, um, the sermon resonated, uh, in the way that it did. It was my most personal sermon. And interestingly, I had a conversation with a rabbinic colleague before the High Holidays, and we often talk to each other about what our sermon topics are. And I told them that I wanted to talk about race, and I knew I wanted to talk about race from many, many months before. Given that it was very much a part of the national discussion. But I realized that it wasn't just that I wanted to talk about race on a national level, but that I wanted to talk about it. Um, starting, as I said, with our own house, cleaning up our own house, and with what I thought were issues of race and racism within the Jewish community, some of

which I experienced myself personally. And, um, and interestingly, this rabbi who I love, you know, he said, well, I'm sure that's going to be a very moving sermon, Angela. But, you know, is that going to be relevant to everyone? And I think his view was that there aren't that many Jews of color in any community. Like, it just doesn't have any relevance necessarily for people who aren't. And, uh, and so, you know, I wasn't sure if this was going to be the kind of thing that I was sharing, something that was maybe relevant for me, and maybe not for most of the Jews of my community that are not experiencing this. Uh, so what was very powerful for me is how much people empathize with this message for so many different reasons. People said, I understand what you're saying, Rabbi, because I grew up in the South and I felt like an outsider because I was a Southern Jew. And, you know, I did things differently. Or, you know, I'm blonde and blue-eyed and people always thought I didn't look Jewish either, or I always felt like a fraud or or not accepted because I didn't know any Hebrew, or I had a non-Jewish parent. And, you know, I guess what I realized is that so many of us are carrying around our own sense of being an outsider or stranger. And that's what was resonating for people. It wasn't just about race, it was about this state of sometimes feeling that we are strangers. Now, is there any more Jewish experience than that? That is who we are. That is our story for always. So I guess in a sense it was a very, very deeply Jewish sermon for all of us. And I think that that's probably why it struck a chord that and the fact that race is something that our whole country is talking about. So I was moved that I heard about this sermon from many different places. I was deeply honored when I did a talk with Isabel Wilkerson, who was the author of the book caste, which I quoted in my sermon. And it was a very, very influential book in my thinking as I was writing the sermon, and she said to me, I saw your sermon. And I thought it was great. Someone sent it to me. It went viral enough that it landed in my inbox, and I was flattered that it made its way to her. And, so I guess there was a sense that this, a bigger question, not just even for Jews. It's a bigger question for our whole country to grapple with. So I was grateful that it hit a chord at the right time.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Yes. I wanted to ask if you thought that there had to be a particular social moment in this country for it to hit a chord. Um, or if, uh, as you said, it's the Jewish story and the American story, right together that, you know, might sort of be intriguing at any point.

Angela Buchdahl: You know, I guess I'll never know how much of it is just, you know, the moment, and how much of it is, you know, was I don't know if it would have hit the same way five years earlier. But then again, I didn't have any desire to write that sermon five years earlier. So I think that I'm also influenced by the moment and by trying to speak to what I think is the issue of the time. And for me, I did feel that race and racism are the issue, of that moment and still, of our moment. And so that's probably what compelled me to give it at the time, and I am sure that the timing of it and the fact that this was sort of in the air is part of why it hit a chord for people.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Yeah. Did Central Synagogue do anything particularly in response to the murder of George Floyd?

Angela Buchdahl: Um, you know, we've always been engaged for 7 or 8 years now in community organizing work around criminal justice reform, which is maybe one of our biggest issues that we do advocacy work on and organize around. Um, and so in a sense, this has already been set into motion. Uh, the year before this sermon, I gave a sermon on reentry of formerly incarcerated citizens and how Second Chances is so deeply important, and how we think about incarceration in this country, and how much we overly incarcerate. Um, so it's definitely like criminal justice reform and racial justice for us has been something that's been on our radar for a while. Uh, in addition to that, we started up a racial justice task force, which looked at everything from internal policies to Jews of color within our community to outside advocacy work, to who our vendors are. So we took like a very top to bottom look at, um, how we're doing diversity, equity, and inclusion in this congregation, and that's ongoing work that we're still doing. We actually hired a consultant around that. And we're still engaged in that. So yes, we did all of those things. We started a Jews of Color group at Central Synagogue. Um, and we actually after my sermon, um, on Yom Kippur, that very day that I gave that sermon in the afternoon, in between the holiday, you know, the morning and the afternoon services, we had a panel of Jews of color from Central speak about their experiences. It was extremely powerful. I was we had over 400 people attend that. Um, and I was just weeping through the whole thing. It was just a very, um, powerful personal experience beyond hearing the story of their rabbi, but hearing other congregants and recognizing, wait a minute, this is not just one person. This is more prevalent across different races and across the community. So, there was a lot that we did in response to this moment. And then we brought in teachers from, um, uh, other guest speakers to talk about race as well. And, uh, we have Bryan Stevenson coming in two weeks to teach. So, um, our community, which runs the Equal Justice Initiative. So this is, uh, as I say, it's not just a one-moment thing. It's an effort of education, of processing both internal and external work that we need to keep doing as a community.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Got it, got it. Thanks. What's next for you? I just learned before I hit record that you're writing a book.

Angela Buchdahl: Yes, I'm working on a memoir. Um, it's called The Soul of a Stranger. And, uh, apropos of what we talked about earlier, I talk about what it means to carry the soul of a stranger. And this is an experience that I've had, through much of my life. But it's the Jewish story. And actually, I've come to understand that it's the human story. Um, you know, we're living in a time right now where even white men feel like they are the outsider, or they are sometimes the stranger. If we've come to that moment, then

there is no one who doesn't feel in some circumstances or some communal experiences or in some situations, like they're the outsider, and, you know, it's something that everyone fears. No one likes to feel like an outsider. And yet I actually would say that there should be a way that we embrace the experience and what it has to teach us, because I think that being the stranger, at least for the Jewish people, has been something that has sparked our creativity. Sometimes when you can't do things one way, you have to find new ways to do them or different things to do. I think, increased our sense of empathy and affinity with the vulnerable and those who are downtrodden or marginalised. Um, and I think that having the soul of the stranger in the best way, pushes us to grow and empathize, and excel. So instead of rejecting that feeling, which is sometimes unpleasant, a feeling like you're the outsider, could we instead think about what that has to teach us? And so that's sort of like the larger thrust of the book. I talk about the idea that Abraham and Sarah, are first Jews, had to leave their homeland and become strangers to start Judaism. They couldn't start Judaism from their birthplace. And once they crossed the Euphrates, they're called Ephraim, and Ephraim in Hebrew we call them Hebrews, but it means the ones who cross over. Um, in other words, our very name is to be boundary crossers like we are. We are the boundary crossers. And, my own life experience has been to be a boundary crosser, whether it's coming from a different country and moving here as an immigrant, or becoming the first Asian American Rabbi, or being a female in a profession that at the time that I started doing it was still dominated by men. Boundary crossing is something that I've done not because I'm trying to break boundaries, but because I wanted to get to the other side, because I really wanted to be over doing what I wanted to be. I felt called to do, um, and we, all of us, have to follow that call. Um, the way Abraham and Sarah followed that call when they got it to cross over as well. So that's sort of the main theme of the book. And I'm trying to have Jewish teachings throughout the book, really kind of inform the way that I read my narrative, and I hope that it'll resonate for other people as well, even though it's a very particular story. But I've come to understand that sometimes in our most particular moments is where we can connect to something very universal in others. That was certainly the lesson of that 2020 sermon.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Yes, yes. Where are you in the in the process of the writing process?

Angela Buchdahl: Well, I had a sabbatical last year, and I put together an 80-page book proposal. Um, found myself a book agent, and, uh, we managed to sell the book, um, to a major publishing house, Viking Penguin Press. That's not a secret. So that is out. And, I'm working with a collaborating writer named Abby Pogrebin, who is a very close friend and past president of Central Synagogue. And, I find that it's a lot, lot harder to find time to write when once I go, once I'm no longer on sabbatical and I'm back in my day job, which is an overwhelmingly wonderful big job. And so, I can't exactly tell you when I think it's going to come out, but I do have a wonderful editor and a wonderful agent and a publisher that wants to see this get out into the wider world, not just not just a Jewish audience. So, I'm hopeful that eventually that will happen.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Nice, nice. Um, Rabbi, listening to your sermon, I think, you know, it struck me that it was, your process that you have been going through this is the American story that, the story of people of color being tracked as they, you know, walk into a synagogue very, you know, resonating, resonating with me very much as a sort of a wider American story. And I apologize for that phone in the background. Um, the, um, I think that was what made me think about the play Angels in America by Tony Kushner, which opens with a monologue by a rabbi that's a eulogy for a woman that he had. The rabbi hasn't met. He talks about the so he talks about the journey that she's taken from the old country. And he calls it a great voyage and says that it's, you know, great voyages like this don't exist anymore. And I wonder if you feel this is very much a 1980s story. I wonder if you feel that your journey is the sort of modern equivalent of the great voyage that he was talking about, of coming from another culture, and making a home.

Angela Buchdahl: I feel that the great voyages are still happening. Um, some of them are literal voyages. I traveled from another country on the other side of the world, and it felt like a giant voyage. And I think that the voyage for my mother was even more stark and perhaps challenging because she was already like a full-grown adult at the time that she made the move. And she sort of lives between worlds and and still to this day, I think she feels that way. And so I think that that's happening there are, you know, and of course, it's happening less in the Jewish community today in terms of, like, physical voyages of immigrants coming to America. But it's certainly still happening in America. It's just coming from different countries and different faith groups and different ethnicities, and cultures. People are making this great voyage and still bringing their perspectives and ideas, and hunger to this great country. And that's happening. But I think on a more metaphoric level, if you want to talk about, um. The immigrant or the person who's a stranger in the community, I most definitely think that that's still happening. I actually happened to recently read a great article by, um, his name is Joseph Edelheit, and he wrote it in the 1980s. And he said that when that influx of Eastern European immigrants came to America, they they, you know, the the earlier wave of German Jewish immigrants saw them as like impinging on Jewish culture that they had kind of created, which was a much more refined, sort of assimilated reform, kind of culture that, uh, and yet before long, that huge wave of Eastern European immigrants really kind of dominated the way we thought about what Jewish culture in America looks like the language, the foods, the just, the ethos of it. And that was sort of partly the sheer numbers of them, but also just, you know, the strength of their collective power. And in this article, the scholar argues that in the 1980s, we no longer had immigrant populations making this great voyage. But he argued that converts who were coming

into the Jewish community were the new immigrants into Judaism. And he was saying, they're bringing their fresh ideas and their other native tongue into the Jewish community. And, he was arguing that, like, with the rate of intermarriage, but with a new perspective of welcoming in and perhaps, encouraging people to convert into Judaism, that this was going to be the new immigrant population and that it was an interesting argument, and I might offer today that it's not a bad lens for thinking about the, um, I think Jews of color in the Jewish community, there's a fairly large number of Jews of color in America. Most of them are not 100% like have not been integrated into what we consider kind of traditional institutional Judaism of synagogue life or Federations, or JCCs. And, um, and you're seeing a tremendous desire to kind of pull in and bring in this population of Jews of color who, in a sense, um, you know, might be landsmen. Right. They're just like the Eastern European Jews were also, you know, Jewish, but they were carrying, maybe another cultural language. Um, they're multilingual, many of them. Um, and I mean that like in a sort of metaphoric sense that they, they speak a language of a different culture as well as the Jewish one. And some of them don't feel as well at home. And I think in the same way that our people have sometimes responded to immigrants with a little bit of fear and a little anxiety, and a little like pushing off. I think that history has shown that our community has been enhanced and strengthened and flourishing because of new waves of immigrants who have come and brought their creativity, their new perspective their drive into our community. So, maybe that's where the new great voyages are happening. Um, and we need to think about what that looks like to cross, maybe a cultural chasm rather than like an actual physical boundary chasm. But I do think that it's very real for some people who carry that. And I think that it will be a real test of our Jewish community, how we respond, and how we draw in this new, not new, but new to the Jewish community, the way it sort of functions now, how we bring them in.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Yeah. It's interesting. The Rabbi character also calls America a melting pot where nothing melted. What do you make of that? Are you do you agree?

Angela Buchdahl: Yeah. Well, it's interesting that that's written in the 80s. In the 80s, like melting pot was like that was the motto of the day. And it was the goal. Um, interestingly, by the time you got to maybe the 90s and certainly the 2000s, it was no longer the goal. The idea of a melting pot was the idea that you would all kinds of become one indistinguishable mass of American and no longer carry your distinctive particularistic qualities. I think by the time, you know, the next decade or so, the, the metaphor that we like better was something like, I don't know, a salad bowl where like it was all mixed in and everyone had their taste, but like the tomato still stayed a tomato and the cucumber was still a cucumber. And you've got to have the distinctive flavors and textures of different groups. And, um, yeah, I don't think that we've all melted. That being said, I do think that America changes every immigrant that comes here. And, um, when I think about our aspiration, it is that there should be some shared values, some shared memory that creates a cohesive nation. And I still believe that that's possible. I still aspire for an America that offers those opportunities for every group that comes through, without telling them that they have to melt their distinguishing traits into some melting pot, but rather that they can maintain, our particularistic identities and yet also take on one more layer of being American which is something that we can all share with each other. Um, when we do that, that layer of Americanness can be like a skin that is external to a certain extent and yet is binding and brings us all together into one body. Um, that's my aspiration for what we can be.

Jeremy Ehrlich: I love that answer. Thank you. Um. I guess if I can ask one more question here. Um, I was also interested in your interview with Isabel Wilkerson, author of Caste, and interested to hear you say that it had informed your sermon somewhat. And I wondered if you would be willing to talk a little bit about that. And you know what it was that you took from that book that went into the sermon.

Angela Buchdahl: So, Isabel Wilkerson kind of pushes us to move away from the framework of race, which is a complete social construct. And to use the language of Caste, which is about creating hierarchies of human value between people. What I thought she did that was fascinating is that she took three kinds of major case studies, of caste systems that are across geography and across time. One of them is the caste system for Black Americans. One was the caste system of, you know, the untouchables or the the lowest class in India, which we kind of have always considered sort of the quintessential caste system and and the caste system for Jews in Nazi Germany. And by doing this, which is, you know, caste systems, that we haven't always called them caste systems, but they are that she's able actually to trace methodologies and strategies of how you create and maintain caste systems that are the same in Nazi Germany as in America, as in India. And I thought that was fascinating, because it makes you realize how much of this is truly, strategically constructed and how insidious it is. And that this is not just about race. And I thought that as a Jew reading about the ways that Nazi Germany studied racial caste laws in America to create the caste system that they did for Jews in Germany. Uh, it was that which was mind-blowing. I had not, as a person who studied the Holocaust a lot, as a rabbi, and as a Jew, I couldn't believe that I'd never really learned that piece of history before. And that was truly eye-opening. And I think it made me realize that this is a deeply human problem that all of us in some way are contributing to, without always even understanding or knowing it. So the awareness of that is the first step in kind of fighting it. And I thought that she wrote it in a brilliant journalistic fashion that was quite storytelling in its way, so that even though it was a highly academic book, it was very readable. And, um,

yeah, I highly recommend that everyone read it, and it impacted the way I thought about, the race sermon, and I tied it in particular around the way that Jews have, um, Taken this category of like seeing ourselves as a race, which is something that our enemies have done to us, and we've in some ways internalized it. Um, as I said, I noted that in, Israel, when they want to decide who is a Jew for the law of return, they actually, literally adopt the racial definition created by our most mortal enemies of the Nazis and say, okay, one Jewish grandparent is what you need to to come to Israel under the law of return. So I just think that's sort of fascinating. And it makes us question, like, how much we internalize issues of caste, uh, without even fully knowing it.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Rabbi, thank you. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us. It's been a real pleasure. And, uh, all the best wishes to you. And we'll, uh, hope to get a chance to talk again at some point in the future.

Angela Buchdahl: Me, too. Thank you for the conversation. And, happy Thanksgiving.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Thanks. And to you.