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An Interview with
Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl



*Photo by Lorin Klaris

Earlier this spring, I met with Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl in New York. I had heard of her years ago when I stumbled upon a video of her on Facebook, lighting Hanukkah candles at the White House with the Obamas.

At the time, I was studying to convert to Judaism. I felt an overwhelming sense of belonging in Judaism, as if I had stood at Sinai in another lifetime. I simultaneously felt really alone. I was painfully self-aware of being one of very few Asian faces at my predominantly white, Ashkenormative, and very welcoming Reform synagogue.

When I saw the video of Rabbi Buchdahl at the White House, I was immediately brought to tears. Here was a woman who looked like me, and she was considered a leader. I felt a deep sadness that I, up until this point, had not seen myself represented in the leaders of our country, or in the Jewish world. It also sparked a moment of inspiration: Rabbi Buchdahl's mere existence showed me, and people who look like me, that it was possible.

Once I began learning about Rabbi Buchdahl's story, I couldn't stop and vowed to one day interview her myself. [Central Synagogue](#), where she is a cantor and rabbi, is the only synagogue I've heard of that has a waiting list of congregants. In a time when religious affiliation across the board is steeply declining, this is unheard of. Rabbi Buchdahl is truly a force, and I'm so honored to share her story with you.



Photo of Rabbi Buchdahl and her family from KoreanAmericanStory.org's legacy project: Sulja Warnick (Rabbi Buchdahl's mother)

On her family background...

My father is a secular Reform Jew, and his family had a tight-knit Jewish community in Tacoma, Washington. He grew up with friends of all faiths, and strongly identified with being Jewish. He didn't keep kosher or Shabbat, he wasn't particularly Jewishly literate, and he ended up marrying my Mom. This forced him, in some ways to confront and articulate what it means to be a Jew. My mother grew up Buddhist in South Korea and was a deeply spiritually engaged person.

I got the best of my mother's spiritual questioning, curiosity and worldview, combined with my father's Jewish vocabulary. They made the choice when I was a child that my sister and I would be raised in the Jewish community. They wanted us to have a faith and a religious identity. They also wanted us to have a larger structure for spiritual navigation with the holidays, calendar, and stories. That was a gift my parents gave me.

“It was unequivocal that I am 100% Jewish, even though I have a non-Jewish mother.”

I was the kid in Hebrew school, in part because of my mother, who was always asking questions about God. I was kind of obsessed with God, and was in constant dialogue with God. I prayed every night before I went to bed. I said the Sh'ma, because I knew that's what Jewish kids were supposed to say before they went to bed. I also had my own spontaneous prayers, and I would also lead my little sister in prayer every night before we went to bed.

On belonging in the Jewish community...

I found my real sense of belonging in the Jewish community through music. I felt like I was connecting to something bigger than myself; I would sing those songs on the swing set, in the car, and when I would walk home from school.

Music was my Jewish vocabulary and I found that it resonated with me much more than some of the traditional prayers I would hear in my Reform synagogue. We didn't have a cantor, so there wasn't a lot of music. I ended up becoming a song leader at Camp Swig (now Camp Newman). That experience blew my mind- I loved Jewish summer camp.



Central Synagogue in New York City

On wanting to become a rabbi...

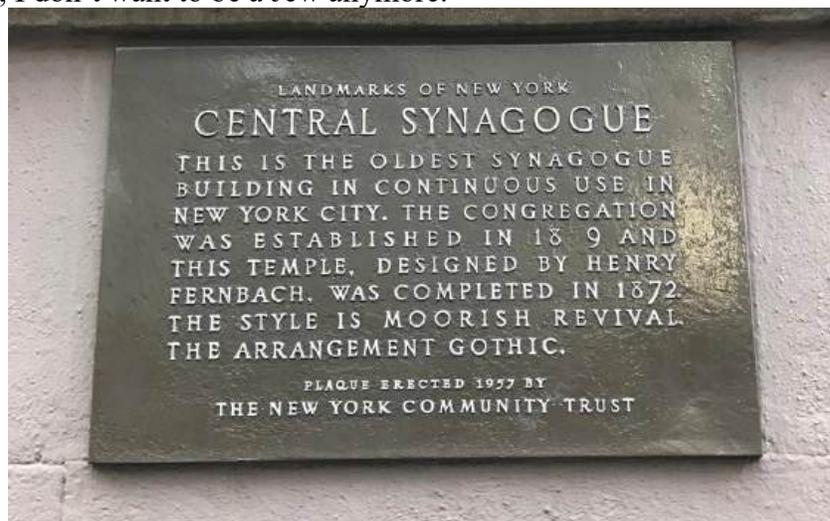
I went to Israel when I was 16 on a program called the Bronfman Youth Fellowship (a pluralistic study trip), with 25 other kids from North America. We were able to do some really intense learning together with the four rabbis on our trip. In some ways, it was so thought provoking it was destabilizing because it asks all these existential questions about who are you and why are you here. I just found that this was my language, and that there are people who get to do this all the time: Rabbis get to teach and learn and do this full-time.

I came back from that trip and said, "I want to be a rabbi." I never thought about doing anything else from that point on. It was also around this time when I was also having an incredible painful, angst-ridden Jewish identity crisis. It started on Bronfman where I had Orthodox Jews telling me, "Well you know, you don't have a Jewish mother, so you're not really a Jew."

On why she wore her Star of David necklace...

"I felt like I needed my Star of David necklace as a marker to show that I was a part of the Jewish community. My face wasn't the marker and my name wasn't the marker, and so my necklace was a way I could announce, 'I'm part of you.'"

But the necklace only made people question me. People would always asked if I knew what it meant, and why I was wearing it. The rejection was so painful that I couldn't tell the story for a really long time without crying every time I would retell it. I had a few pivotal experiences like that, that felt like terrible rejections. I actually had moments where I considered not being Jewish at all anymore. Even though I actually couldn't think about becoming anything other than a rabbi, I thought, I don't want to be a Jew anymore.



On rejection in the Jewish community...

It was the summer after my junior year in college. I was doing research for my senior thesis, and I called a woman to ask her if she would be willing to be interviewed by me. My thesis was about Jewish women in the cantorate, and the role that women have played in shaping theology through shaping Jewish music. When I was talking to this woman, she quickly figured out that my mother wasn't Jewish. Then she said, "you know what, I'm sorry but I cannot talk to you because I can only teach Torah to Jews, and you're not a Jew." It was such a horrible thing to say, and by the way, so not Jewish. Why would a Jew say that they couldn't teach Torah to someone who wasn't a Jew in the first place? It was so painful.

In addition to that, I went and prayed with the Women of the Wall back in their very early years, over 25 years ago. At the time, the group was filled with hard-core Jewish feminists. I went with two friends, "super Jews" who knew how to daven, (pray in an orthodox way), they were praying very fast, all in Hebrew. I couldn't keep up and I felt like such an outsider. Then they began to read from the Torah, and they gave both of my friends an Aliyah (the honor of reciting blessings over the Torah). I remember the whole time, feeling like they were looking at me like I was just an outsider who came with my friends, and that I didn't really belong there. When they asked for volunteers who would like to have an Aliyah, I raised my hand. It really became important to me in that moment to say, I know how to do this, I'm Jewish too. I got up there without a prayer book in front of me and I messed up the words.

“Twelve women’s voices corrected me in that moment, and I literally wanted the Earth to swallow me up. I had set this up as the test to show that I belonged, and I failed.”

After that, I called my mother in tears and said, "This is it. I'm getting rejected all the time, I don't feel like I belong, I don't feel like I know enough, I don't feel like I'm authentic. I don't have a Jewish face, I don't have a Jewish name, so I'm just going to stop being a Jew, and no one will even notice." My mother said, "Is that really possible?" That very simple question, "Is it possible to just stop being a Jew at this point in your life, Angela?" made me confront for the first time, that I couldn't.

“I realized that I could no sooner shed being Jewish than I could shed being a woman or being Korean.”

Up until this point, being Jewish felt like a coat that I put on. It felt like it wasn't really my coat, that it belonged to my dad. I was still wearing it and it didn't fit exactly, and everyone else was telling me that it wasn't really my coat. But it wasn't until that moment that I realized that it was so deeply who I was that I couldn't just stop being a Jew. That was actually the moment that I decided to reaffirm that I'm a Jew.



Rabbi Buchdahl with President and Mrs. Obama at a Hanukkah ceremony at the White House in 2014

On her reaffirmation ceremony...

I decided to have a beit din and go to the mikveh and have what I called a reaffirmation ceremony. I didn't think of it as a conversion, because I had been a Jew my whole life. Instead, I wanted to affirm that I was choosing to be Jewish actively. At 21 years old, that was really powerful ritual for me. Like most really good rituals, it transformed something in me. It really solidified, quelled and softened some of those deep questions of doubt and inauthenticity. In some ways, it wasn't just the ritual; it was all the work that got me to the ritual that helped me get there.

On why we should stop talking about Judaism as a race...

I know this might sound crazy, but [ashkenormative Jews in white Jewish spaces] need in some ways to be able to articulate what it means to be a Jew beyond their ethnicity. If it's just about an ethnicity or a race, then it's like a club that you're either born into or you're not.

It is such a fallacy, not just today, but a fallacy throughout all of Jewish history, to imagine that we've only ever been Ashkenazi Jews. If you went to Israel today, there is a majority of Sephari, Mizrahi, Ethiopian and Jews of color in Israel now. When you go to Israel you realize, "Wow. The Jewish community as a diaspora for thousands of years has always been many, many ethnicities."

Judaism has never been a race. Frankly, the idea of us as a race has always been initially brought by our enemies. Everyone from the Pharaoh in the story of Passover, to the Spanish Inquisition, to Nazi Germany, persecuted the Jews because of this purity of blood concept.

"We should just completely stop talking about Judaism as a race. That has never, ever, been to our benefit and it

simply is not true. Jews need to be able to locate and articulate what it means to be a Jew outside of a very thin cultural identity that is often about ethnic, tribal markers. It's such a limited way of understanding what Judaism is and it also is lacking all the depth and richness of what it is."

I think what could be very helpful for Jews to understand again what it is to be Jewish. What the values are that undergird it, that go deeper, that someone could decide to say, 'I want to be a part of that.'



On being an Asian American Jew...

Well, I used to be the poster child, right? I struggled with this because on the one hand I didn't want to be the token Asian. I wanted to be known for who I am. At the same time, I grew up in a

Jewish world where I never, ever saw myself represented in any Jewish book, in any Jewish magazine, or on a bimah (the altar or platform in a Jewish synagogue where services are lead). I never saw myself represented, ever. And it was extremely hard to feel like I was the only one. I am really appreciative that there's a real effort that people are making to say, "you're not the only one." PJ Library is putting out children's books that actively portray Jews of color so it's sort of more normative, and we can see ourselves in those books.

It is a tough balance. I was once asked to be in this Judea Pearl book that listed 150 names on the back. They put my picture on the front, but I was not one of the names. This is before I was in the position I'm in now; I was much less visible. I felt like, wow, they want to put my picture on the cover, but they're not listing my name. It was this weird feeling of they just want to say, "Look how diverse we are."

On the other hand, people approached me and said, "Oh my God, you exist. My daughter, who's Korean and adopted feels like she's not alone and can't believe that there's a rabbi who looks like her." This is the flip side of why I keep doing it.

Thank you so much, Rabbi Buchdahl, for paving the way for other Jews of color like myself. I know it hasn't been easy, but it is because of you that people like me get to come up in a more just and welcoming world, and see ourselves reflected in positions of power. I am deeply grateful to you, for showing us what's possible.