The College Commons Podcast

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: The Pulpit Isn't a Pedestal

(Begin audio)

(Music)

Introduction: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Hollo, your host, and you're listening to our special series from the pulpit, discussions about influential sermons and speeches with the rabbis who gave them.

Joshua Holo: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and our conversation with Rabbi Angela Buchdahl. Since twenty fourteen, Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl has served as the senior rabbi of Central Synagogue in New York City after having joined Central as senior cantor in two thousand and six. She is the first woman to lead Central's reformed congregation in its one hundred and eighty five year history. Born in Korea to a Jewish American father and a Korean Buddhist mother, Rabbi Buchdahl is the first Asian American to be ordained as a cantor or rabbi in North America. She has been featured in dozens of news outlets, including the Today Show, NPR, and PBS, among others. Rabbi Buchdahl has also been nationally and internationally recognized for her innovations in leading worship, which draw large crowds online and in person. And today, we're going to focus on this aspect of her rabbinate as part of our special series on sermons. Rabbi Buchdahl, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: Thank you. Happy to be here.

Joshua Holo: As an introduction to you as a sermonizer, would you ruminate a bit on the genre of the sermon as both a written composition and a live performance?

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: Sermons are meant to be heard, not read. And I think it is a different exercise to write for reading than it is for speaking. And perhaps because of my background in music as well, when I have the time to really work a sermon, I'm not just thinking about the content I want or the Jewish teaching. I'm actually also thinking about the rhythm, the sound, the alliteration. I'm thinking about some of the things you might

think about when you would be writing a poem or a song. And there is a a rhythm to a sermon, and the power of it, much of it comes from the sound of what it actually sounds like. If you listen to great orators like a Martin Luther King, you could practically track pitches of where his voice is going up and down. And it it it literally has a musicality to it. And I think people underestimate the power of the oral experience of a sermon over the written content. I think the thing that gets underestimated the most of all, however, is the visual experience of a sermon. Studies show that actually has more impact than the oral or the written.

Joshua Holo: Well, for what it's worth and in the spirit of the special series, I recommend checking out the it's mostly audio. I'm not sure if it's video anymore, of Stephen s Wise, who was a fantastic orator. He gets into the pitch thing and the rhythm thing full throttle the way he described it. So it would be nice to welcome all of you to go to the American Jewish archives and check out the, files. They're really, really cool. So capturing a little bit the flow of your thinking with respect to the other ingredients that go into the presentation of a sermon beyond the literal words, I want to ask you about formality. Certainly the videos that I've seen online, they're formal. And I think we would agree that there's a tremendous amount of power in formality in public speaking in general, but certainly from the pulpit. Tell us a little bit about how you feel about the power of formality, but also spare a word if you would about the cost of formality.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: I am not naturally a super formal person. I am a fan of plain speak, of humor, of vulnerability, and being able to be very real on the Bema. So I actually find that it is helpful to me, especially when I came into this role as a young Asian woman, where there have been all sorts of ways that actually I go against sort of the traditional, quote, gravitas of your traditional male rabbi that was older, that the formality helps me because I'm naturally not that formal. But it in in some ways, it kind of gives a container that gives it already some level of transcendence and elevation. I will share that this was even more pronounced for me when I was the cantor. I've got this extremely beautiful formal sanctuary in Bema, but I'm a guitar playing, song leader trained cantor. And when I came out there as a thirty three year old young woman with a guitar strapped around me, it would have carried out very differently if I was in a less formal pulpit. But in some way, the formality of the space, but then the warmth and realness of what I was presenting, which was very authentically from me, I think that something about that combination ended up allowing me actually to be genuine in my informality in a way that didn't dumb down or cheapen the sort of sacredness of what was happening. I don't know if that makes sense, but I feel very much that the formality of my space works with me and my natural tendencies to be less formal. And I actually think that part of the magic sauce is that we do not put on a rabbi voice, and we will share personal stories, and we are very authentic and

in some ways informal. Not too informal, but we are somewhat informal. And the space actually helps hold a sense of sacredness with that informality.

Joshua Holo: The formality, it seems like you're saying, offers you some scaffolding. Yes. It also connects to the follow-up question I have that's an allied but different phenomenon in public speaking and in sermonizing in particular, which is authority. By the logic of the genre, the sermon gets its authority from the religious tradition of the speaker and presumably the listeners, at least, presumptively. What does it mean, and how does a sermon differ from other forms of public speaking insofar as it is the vehicle for a civilizational or religious authority rather than, or perhaps in addition to, the authority that you individually embody?

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: Rabbi, in its most simple form, is just teacher. And the authority I have comes from my knowledge and continued study of Jewish text. We are drawing upon a three thousand plus wisdom tradition, and that's what we're really here to teach. Of course, there's also an authority that's kind of unimpeachable that comes from your own personal experience. Your experience is your real experience, and so we draw upon the authority that comes from a lived experience. And then we try to draw upon a kind of authority that comes from a moral compass that is informed by our Jewish text, but also informed by our own kind of inherent lived experience as well and role as rabbi. And so I think the role of a sermon, what distinguishes it from other kinds of teaching or other modes of communication is every sermon has a thesis. I'm trying to convince you of a thesis. And a good thesis should be refutable. Meaning, if it's just super obvious, be kind. That's not a thesis. Be kind even if it hurts. That's more of a thesis. And every good thesis should have an actionable item at the end of it, at least one. Even if the actionable item is about changing the way you think about something, and I think sometimes even better if we can get you to change the way you might act around something. But I think a sermon is trying to actually influence thinking and behavior based off a thesis that is not obvious and challenging.

Joshua Holo: It's like a divine op ed.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: There we go. I like that.

Joshua Holo: But but there's weight. There's there seems to be a heightened risk of imposter syndrome when you're representing God. Even though you don't purport to represent God in any kind of crass or literal way, I understand that. And anyone in the

reform movement would understand that. But nevertheless, you're channeling something much bigger than yourself.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: One should always feel imposter syndrome if they think they're speaking for G-d. I just wanna make that clear.

Joshua Holo: Great. As we all should.

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Joshua Holo: In your Yom Kippur sermon titled We Are Family, you address implicit bias and racism in the Jewish community in particular, and you invoke your own experience to illustrate the problem. You delivered that sermon five years ago. How do you see our progress as a community or lack thereof in these intervening five years?

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: I gave that sermon, the high holidays after George Floyd's murder. And, initially, when that event happened and there was a real strong national reckoning around race, I thought I was going to talk about the national issue around race. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that there was work to do in our own house and we had to begin at home and that there were muscles that we needed to exercise within our own community that would then also enable us to see and behave differently within a larger national context. And, you know, I'd been a rabbi for over twenty years when I gave that sermon, and I never really talked about my own personal experience as a Korean Jew. It's obvious that that's who I am. I don't shy away from talking about that, but I've never actually shared the pain or the difficulty of that within the Jewish community until I had been a rabbi for a very long time. And I worried about sharing that story to a certain extent partly because I thought, well, it's a very particular experience and how many people have this particular experience. But what was fascinating to me is the enormous response I got, which was more than any other sermon I've ever done. And I mean, not just in my own congregation, but even nationally. There were people who were Jews of color who deeply resonated with the sermon. But then there were people, a Jew from the South, who said, I resonate. I just because I felt like an outsider because I was from

the South, and I had this accent and whatever. Another Jew was like, I had two Jewish parents, but we grew up really poor, and we could never afford the dues. And I just felt like I was not really welcome in the Jewish community. Or someone said I'm gay, and I'm also Jewish. Everyone is actually managing multiple identities that frequently feel like they put them on the outside in one way or another. And so in some way, by talking about the most particular experience that I've had, it actually hit the most universal chord. So I think that that is a lesson that I'm still trying to draw upon today as five years later, of course, we still have major issues of racism in America. But I would say that we as Jews are in a very different place around our own sense of vulnerability. And I think that maybe one of the lessons I'd like for us to think about is that we need to both speak from our own personal place. As I said, that is a real authority to understand our own experience. When we actually get to the very deepest truth of that experience and share it in its deep particularity, it often is the point of connection with a universal experience that I'm going to guess it's not the same to experience antisemitism as it is to experience anti black racism. And yet there is a shared humanity that we can touch when we talk about that in the most deep and honest ways.

Joshua Holo: In our generation, you may recall that Fiddler on the Roof was a blockbuster in Japan, and it was perceived by many American Jews at the time as really surprising that something so particularistic that we felt was sort of untranslatable was in fact precisely the thing Mhmm. That would connect on a visceral level to an entire population whose experience, you know, statistically doesn't even overlap without.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: Yeah. But that universal question of how you balance tradition and family loyalty and filial piety and your own dreams and revolutionary, you know, aspirations, yes, that hit home for for others.

Joshua Holo: We're gonna stick with Yom Kippur and go in a different direction here. So this past Yom Kippur, in your sermon, you doubled down on the theme of forgiveness, understandably, for the for the context. But you point out that you feel that forgiveness is in short supply these days. And I think we all know in our own lives how one's resistance to forgive often simply boils down to the shift from righteousness to self righteousness. Uh-huh. Meaning, our inability to forgive often has roots in legitimate offense that has, at some point, for whatever reason, ceased to be a legitimate reason to deny forgiveness, and yet we cling to it. But on Yom Kippur, you alluded to the fact that this resistance has grown into a social trend, not just a personal one. What broad social or political trends across the spectrum illustrate the most troubling and intransigent examples of the failure to forgive?

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: So I have seen righteous indignation and upset over many different people's reactions, for example, to October seventh. And there were some despicable, I dare say, unforgivable reactions of Israel deserved this. They brought this upon themselves. Even they created this so they could start a war. Just outlandish kinds of things. I think we as Jews have a right to be not only deeply upset about this, but to say that is outside the camp of acceptable reactions. And yet I do appreciate that some people responded with an emotional response, with less informed response in those early days and maybe weeks after October seventh. And I think that if there are people who have since then modulated their position or said, didn't quite mean it this way or whatever it is, I think we have just written off whole swaths of communities, populations. And I think that we, of all people, should understand that when we react in a crisis moment from a place of emotion, perhaps trauma, perhaps many different feelings that we're not we're not reacting from our most rational part of our brain. We're reacting from our amygdalas, and we might say things that we don't necessarily feel at a different time. And I think to create the space for people to actually be able to change their minds, to be able to maybe ask for forgiveness, I think that we are going to find ourselves, unfortunately, as a Jewish community, really truly alone if we cut off everyone who at any point might have said something offensive. Now that doesn't mean we just accept anyone who said anything. We have a lot of guidance from our tradition on, you know, what it takes for someone to make, for example, and and for ask for forgiveness. We have some people who are unapologetic or unrepentant in their kind of hateful responses. That's a different thing. But even then, if we truly believe that no human being is discardable and that repentance is always possible, I'm not sure we should be giving up on anyone. That doesn't mean we're gonna spend our time on everyone, but I don't know that we should be giving up on people wholesale. And I worry that we have been too quick to do that, especially in our vulnerability.

Joshua Holo: Switching gears again, if I may ask, what's your linguistic relationship to the Korean language?

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: Korean is my mother tongue. I left when I was four and a half, only speaking Korean. But when I moved to America, I had about six months before kindergarten, and my parents, like, switched over completely to English, both my mother and my father. So that by the time I got to kindergarten, I could speak English. But very quickly, I started to lose my Korean. So I would say that today, I can understand a good amount of Korean when my mother is speaking with her sisters or I'm speaking with my cousins. I can get my basic needs met in Korean. Beyond that, I really can't speak. My middle son has spent more than six months living in Korea, studying the language, studying it in college, so his Korean has now far surpassed mine.

Joshua Holo: I ask because I believe that every language on the planet has a unique genius, an insight into the condition of the universe or anything.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: A little bit about what Korean tells you.

Joshua Holo: That's what I was gonna ask you. I was gonna ask you, what's the genius of Korean?

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: Built into Korean structured language are honorifics that go before and ends of words that immediately help you understand where you fall in the formal hierarchy of your relationship with the person you're speaking with. It is so indicative of Korean culture. There are true benefits to this sort of deferential understanding, respect for the knowledge of elders that is built into the language. Now, of course, there are also some liabilities of that, and it can be taken to an extreme. But there's also language of words you say for anyone who was an older woman than me. She's an Ani. And it's also that word is also similar to sister, like older sister. So there's something about that that immediately also brings familiarity even as the language has a kind of a very formal structure to it. There are several levels of honorifics that you would give to your peer, to someone older than you, and then to someone who's deeply important that's older than you. And so I find that that structure alone is, a window into Korean culture.

Joshua Holo: Very cool. In relatively recent decades, music has taken its place on the pulpit. Not, mind you, the cantorial pulpit where it's obvious, but the rabbinic pulpit and, indeed, the sermon itself. And I'm really speaking about you because you are both a cantor and rabbi, and at least sometimes you sing from the pulpit. Give us an example of when the music you walk away recognizing, having felt it in the room that the music added to the sermon. It it it it strengthened your point and the power to communicate it. But also tell us a case where it maybe didn't work, and it maybe actually undermined what you were trying to achieve.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: I think of what I would call, in this case, the sermon anthem, which is the song I often sing at the end of a sermon. Not every sermon on a Friday night, but for high holiday sermons, I consider them a musical midrash on the sermon. It's almost like a commentary. In addition to giving you a moment of pause and breath where you can move away from the intellectual experience of a sermon and move into the emotional part of the ex sermon, I do think that music opens the heart in an emotional way that sometimes allows the intellectual message to enter deeper. So I I'll give you an example, when rabbi

Rubinstein, after twenty three years, gave his, like, I'm leaving the congregation sermon. It was his last high holiday sermon as the senior rabbi of Central Synagogue. He termed it a love letter to this congregation. And it was emotional and beautiful. And out of that, I went into a mashup of this beautiful song, an Israeli song that is called Asherah, and it's a song about singing to god and love. And I mashed it up with Steve Winwood's higher love, and it worked really beautifully. But it basically took this idea of love, love both for God and creation, but also higher love, which it I mean, when it was originally written, I'm sure it was it was probably a love song, but maybe not. I don't know. But in this context, it elevated this love letter that our rabbi was offering the congregation and understood that part of what that love was is that as a congregation, they were able to achieve this higher purpose and higher love and serve something bigger than themselves, which could only happen with this community and rabbi together in a sort of covenantal relationship. So all of that to me was kind of captured by this sermon anthem, which also then was joyful, loving, and emotional, and people just wept in this. It was hard to explain how this became the exclamation point on that sermon in a sense. I remember also talking about what it is to be American and also care about Israel was a sermon that Peter gave when I was the cantor, and I ended up doing a Hatikvah and America the Beautiful mashup. And something about just those two things too was that was maybe one of the sermon anthems I I got the most emotional sort of feedback about. There have been times when we have tried probably too hard to be cute and have a perfect match and maybe done, like, a Broadway song afterward, and people felt like that cheapened the message or perhaps felt too on the nose or pulled them out of a sacred place into a kind of more performative space. So there have been times we have to be very careful where it is maybe not worked as well.

Joshua Holo: Politics from the pulpit is a hot topic in rabbinic formation these days. I I know where have I speak at the Hebrew Union College where this comes up a lot, and I'd like to ask you to weigh in. Specifically, however, I'd like to ask you to apply a broad definition of politics rather than a narrow one. Here's what I mean. I've seen many people in many contexts, not just the religious context, dodge the accusation of politicization by pointing out that they're not being partisan, meaning they don't pedal in politics defined as specific candidates or specific political parties. But they're political nonetheless, at least to my taste, certainly by a broader definition of the term. So what do we make of politics from the pulpit when by politics we mean topics of civic concern and debate. And what's the cost benefit there as you understand it from the pulpit?

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: In the broadest sense, politics are the way that care for our society is lived out in a kind of, like, practical sense. Laws impact people's lives in very serious ways. The government has direct impact on protecting the most vulnerable in our communities and creating a sense of justice when it can. So I think the idea that we could completely opt out of anything that is political in that broad sense, I think, is an abdication

of our role as leaders in the community. That being said, I try to be very thoughtful and judicious about when I might take on a topic that is the most controversial political thing that's going on in the air. And when I do, I think my goal is both, of course, to bring some Jewish wisdom to the topic. I I try to avoid language like the Jewish view is because as we know, if we're being honest, there's never just one Jewish view, but I I try to bring Jewish wisdom to the topic. And when I am at my best, I'm actually sharing multiple views, including the view that I don't agree with. But I'm trying to share that also with some Jewish backing because almost always you can find the minority and majority position on all these different views. I try to humanize the issue in some way. I try to illustrate, like, what's at stake, and then I try to talk about the moral issues and where we wanna be. I'll take a topic that was political in this last election. It felt like the group of people perhaps most targeted in, certainly, in ad campaigns in the last election were transgender men and women and non binary folks. And so this was not about policy issues or, you know, what the law should be, but I understood that in my community, there was still a lot of not knowing. So what I wanted to do was to bring a story and a a face that could help people understand some of the issues that are at play. So I asked a young woman who grew up in the reform movement, happened to be the child that encouraged Camp Eisner to take its first transgender camper in the bunk of her chosen gender. And not only was that the first time Eisner did it, it was actually the first religious sleepaway camp in the country at the time when they did this in two thousand fourteen. It was a long time ago. And she is now a young woman who just graduated from college. She does not see herself as a trans activist, which I think actually is important in the context of this because this was not with an axe to grind. This was, let me tell you my experience. Again, there's an authority that is just unimpeachable from what your lived experience is, And she was not preachy. She just shared her story. It was so powerful, and people gave her a standing ovation, which is not a typical thing in my synagogue. But because they just heard the truth of her experience, I think that they understood something different. So I think that a good sermon, and that was not me getting it. That was just giving the platform to someone who I knew could give it really well. I think that a good sermon helps people think without feeling like it's telling them exactly what to think.

Joshua Holo: We've touched on authority, vulnerability, but I'd like to zero in a little bit on vulnerability. It can be a powerful relational tool, both one on one and in public speaking in general, and certainly in sermons. But vulnerability can also become practiced, and the speaker can become accustomed to the self exposure. And while self exposure itself can also still be powerful, sometimes it reaches a point where it's no longer the same thing as vulnerability properly understood, by which I mean putting something at risk on the line that can really hurt you. What sermon or topic has left you genuinely vulnerable?

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: When I came back from my first encounter trip in two thousand seventeen, and we are marking the fiftieth year since the six day war. I remember that I felt like I had to give a different Israel sermon than I'd ever given before because that experience had shifted my sense of responsibility to another narrative. And I will always have a primary responsibility to my Israeli brothers and sisters, and I knew the Palestinian narrative, but I didn't feel that I was responsible to sharing it even as a rabbi in the same way. And this time, I felt like I did, and I did within a context that I understood was the larger context of Israelis. But I remember that that sermon felt very scary to to share, that the word occupation had not yet been uttered from our Bema at that time. And I knew that it was going to make waves. And when I have difficult, quote, political sermons, whether by Israel or others, I will always have multiple readers, including people who I think come from an opposite perspective. So I did share it with a trusted leader who comes from a much more conservative perspective, and he was very upset by many pieces of it, which caused me both to rethink some of the way I wanted to phrase certain elements that I thought would just make people stop listening if I didn't. But it also just heightened my sense of vulnerability in it. And I did lose a few families after that sermon, but I also felt that witnessing had created a sense of responsibility in me. I felt that I needed to shift the way I spoke about it. And it it not only shifted that sermon, but it shifted the way we teach Israel here and who we see when we go on trips. I feel like as a Zionist who deeply believes that Jews have a right to self determination in their own land, because I believe in that deeply, I have to also believe that the Palestinians also have that right. And they're not just all gonna leave. So if we do not think that we are responsible to both of these narratives and in some way reconcile with how two people are gonna live on this land, I don't think that we are being responsible as Jewish leaders now. This continues to be a challenging topic. Talking about Israel because it's so fraught and because we live in an unforgiving and, challenging time, there is something about feeling that this topic, particularly in the Jewish community, will make some people not forgive you and walk away for good. That's something that I have experienced, and I think that that can't stop me from doing what I think I have to do. But my goal is to keep diverse views at the table. That is really truly a big goal of mine.

Joshua Holo: Well, Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, thank you so much for the pleasure of the conversation and all the work that you do from the pulpit precisely in your summons and otherwise to create a more forgiving and engaged world. It's really been a pleasure.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl: Thank you so much.

Closing: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons podcast available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And check out HUC Connect, compelling

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