

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([00:41](#)):

Who knows, maybe it is just for this moment that you find yourself in a position of leadership? I'm Rabbi Liz Hirsch and I'm your host. Inspired by the story of Esther, I will invite women in leadership to talk about women and leadership. As CEO of Women of Reform Judaism, the women's affiliate of the largest Jewish denomination in North America, I am committed to sharing powerful stories of women who stand out in their fields, who have stepped up just for this moment. Each week I interview women who are influencing the world around them. My guest today is Rabbi Angela Buchdahl.

([00:56](#)):

No more than my place, no less than my space. This kavanah, this intention, is one way to succinctly express the Jewish value of anavah, or humility. In a spiritual practice known as Mussar, we are invited to consider midot, or values, and to meditate and focus on them. Mussar is a process of tikkun midot, of internal repair and renewal, providing us with the platform and the basis to then go out and repair the world, to engage in tikkun olam. When practicing mussar, it's often helpful to consider a scale with two sides. When focusing on a mida, on a value, like humility, the scale is essential. One should not be so lacking in humility that it leads to boastfulness, overconfidence, or self-aggrandizement. One should also not be so full of humility as to be self-effacing or meek. We strive for a balanced measure of humility, and that's what makes it a practice.

([02:09](#)):

When I asked my guest today, Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, how she connects with the character of Esther who inspires our podcast, she offered this reflection. Esther leads with humility embodying this mida, "no more than my place, no less than my space." Rabbi Angela Buchdahl is Senior Rabbi of Central Synagogue in New York City. She's the first woman to lead Central's Reform congregation in its 180-year history. She first joined Central Synagogue as Senior Cantor in 2006, and she was chosen by the congregation to be Senior Rabbi in 2014. 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. We spoke about a variety of topics related to Jewish life in North America, Israel, and around the world. We particularly highlighted that voting is open for the World Zionist Congress, our unique opportunity as Jews living outside of Israel to have an impact on the values, activities, and budget in the state of Israel. You can learn more about the World Zionist Congress elections open for voting from March 10th to May 4th at www.vote4reform.org. That's vote number four reform.org or check out the link in the show notes. Rabbi Buchdahl and I are both proud members of the Vote Reform slate, and we hope that you'll vote to send us to represent you at the World Zionist Congress later this year.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl

([03:46](#)):

I have an unusual path to the rabbinate. I was born in South Korea to a Korean mom and a Jewish American father and ended up in the United States when I was about five years old in the thriving Jewish metropolis of Tacoma, Washington. It was a one synagogue town, about 300 families, and my father's family had, I was already the fourth generation in that community. So I came into a community and my family didn't look like the other families, but I also had a deep sense of rootedness in the community. And the synagogue was a true home for me and for my family. I loved going to Temple Beth El, rose up in the ranks as youth group president and song leader for my synagogue and helper at Hebrew school and kind of Jewish representative of Tacoma in my high school. So I had a very strong Jewish identity, this deep sense that I was responsible for representing Judaism.

[\(04:47\)](#):

I think my first trip to Israel was when I was 16 on the Brofman Fellowship, but that was the first time I met Jews who came from much larger Jewish communities with a different kind of infrastructure. And it was also the first time that I encountered Jews who said, well, you don't fit the halakhic definition of being Jewish. And that was painful to say the least, and destabilizing for an identity that had been formed. And with adolescence of course, which is a hard time anyway, figuring out who am I? And I would say that it was a piece of the journey for the next five years. On the one hand, I was constantly feeling like I wasn't authentic or I wasn't Jewish enough. On the other hand, this was also the same time that I became a religious studies major, that I wanted to become a rabbi and couldn't think of doing anything else with my life, but, and that I came to the East Coast because I just sort of felt like the center of Jewish America was New York and probably still feel that in a certain way and wanted to just be in the mix of all of that.

[\(05:48\)](#):

And I feel really fortunate that along the way I had really incredible mentors and teachers who encouraged me. My parents, although they worried at different times about this path, were highly supportive and worked at Westchester Reform Temple with Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of our Movement. But back then he was my senior rabbi. I worked with him for over a decade in Scarsdale, so had wonderful experience there and then came to Central Synagogue 19 years ago, first as the Senior Cantor for eight years. And then I've been in the Senior Rabbi job for 11.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(06:20\)](#):

I really relate to what you were saying about growing up representing the Jewish community in your hometown and being in a small Jewish community. I grew up outside of Boston in an area that's known for having a lot of congregations in a thick Jewish community. But my particular town, my high school, was a very small Jewish community. So I often felt like one of very few or the only in the community. And that's what really drove me to get involved with NFTY and with youth movement and with camp was going to something to be a part of and to connect. And I think also as it sounds like maybe was the case for you, really rooted me in, I had to decide from a pretty young age if this is an identity that I wanted to count myself into and be representing and feel pretty rooted in that because I was always both going out of my home space in order to engage and connect with it. And also when I was in my secular high school and in those pieces really on my own so to speak,

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl [\(07:24\)](#):

I think you can have extremely strong Jewish identity in particular in places where there aren't a lot of Jews. I married someone who grew up in rural Vermont. He literally was the only Jewish family in the town. And yeah, sometimes when you feel like if I don't represent, it won't exist, you feel a huge amount of responsibility. And then of course, desire to connect with others.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(07:47\)](#):

I would love to ask you a little bit more about congregational life in communities. In my seat as CEO of Women of Reform Judaism, we think a lot about the connections that people have from their local sisterhoods and women's groups and of course through the congregations and together. And there's this thread though of, well, people have so many other ways to relate, to connect, to find new forms of Jewish community. It's 2025 and you are leading an incredibly vibrant congregation that's also found

different ways to really express itself and to create community for people. I'd love to hear your reflections on that as someone sitting in that role.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl ([08:29](#)):

I still think that synagogues are the foundational structure for Jewish life, and I really believe in them and benefited from them in my own life. And I went from one end of the spectrum of being in a small 300 family congregation that had one clergy person to working in one of the largest congregations. And we have a dozen clergy here and a much bigger synagogue structure. But I think at the heart of it, we're still trying to meet the same need, which is people's deep yearning for community and meaning and purpose and a sense of transcending some of the pettiness that can be in the world and reminding ourselves of a bigger story that we're part of. I mean, Central is a very large congregation and yet I think at the heart of it, we are a collection of little villages, and I'm proud of the fact that people really feel that it feels like a Hamish Shul when we are as large as we are.

([09:26](#)):

And I think that that's in part because people connect in through a kind of smaller subgroup within the community. So I use the analogy of if you are not from New York and you come and visit, it can feel overwhelming and large and that everyone must feel anonymous because it's just this giant city. If you actually live here, you're like, I don't feel anonymous at all. Are you kidding me? I know everyone in my building and I know my deli guy because you've got your neighborhood and actually you're interacting almost even more with your neighborhood of people. And that is what we have. We have lots of neighborhoods at Central, and it's everything from regular groups that study together. We have over four or 500 people who do weekly study with each other, whether it's a Talmud class, a Bible and bagels, a Milton class, Hartman, I engage.

([10:16](#)):

So there are people who are in regular learning, there are people who are in regular service, the breakfast program are coming home for formerly incarcerated citizens, and there are people who serve together hundreds of people who do that. And we have nursery school classrooms and religious school classrooms, and we have core groups which are kind of affinity spaces, and we have so many different ways that people find their sort of smaller community. I think though that there is still a power also of sometimes feeling like you're part of something much bigger. And that is also I think the benefit we have of having that and the resources of that, the many different gateways. And not everyone can do that, but I think that that's also the role that the Movement plays, that if you come from a smaller community, you can tap into the larger NFTY or into what used to be like a biennial or regional convention so that you could be reminded it's not just us out here by ourselves. That was really important for me growing up also. So I think that we just get to do that all in under one roof.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([11:16](#)):

Right? There's that parallel that contrast almost between people wanting to feel known as individuals and to really have those deep relationships and connections and then also the power of being part of something greater than yourself. And it's a great way to think about it that you have the ability to create that under one umbrella with Central, and I completely agree that that's a strength and a power that comes from being a part of a denomination and a movement as well. We will share this episode in just a few weeks, but we are speaking on this really difficult day on the funeral of Shiri, Kfir, and Ariel Bibas, and I want to use that as the way into our conversation highlighting some of what we want to talk about related to Israel. And I love to hear just any thoughts, reflections you have about this day. And I'm also thinking about it through that frame of feeling connected to people, not just in your congregation,

broader community, but Jewish people around the world. And thinking about that as sort of the starting place for those feelings. I'd love to hear just what this day is bringing up for you.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl ([12:30](#)):

Yeah, it is deeply painful and I think last week it really felt like the entire Jewish community was grieving together as those coffins came back. And I mean, I think a reflection for that is that we know this already as clergy, we know this as human beings, that grief is reflected love and you don't feel grief if you don't feel to begin with some sense of connection. And the intensity of the grief is a reminder of the intensity of the sense of connection that I think Jews around the world have felt with our brothers and sisters in Israel. We felt those Bibas babies were our babies and we were in that story with them and we prayed for them. And I do actually think that our community has been in some state of trauma and grief in the last 16 months, and sometimes it flares up and feels more raw as it did last week and now and other times it can recede a little bit.

([13:36](#)):

But I'd like to think about this as a reminder, not just of the ways that our fates are intertwined and connected, but of the deep sense of family and love that I think we had in some ways lost up to this point. I am reminded of the fact that before October 7th, the Rosh Hashanah right before, a month before all this terrible and this happened, the biggest thing we were worried about in Israel was sort of this internal civil war of the judicial reforms. And I really was worried for Israel. It now feels almost naive to think about thinking the existential threat to Israel at the time. I think it actually was, it just increased exponentially after October 7th. But I gave a sermon to my community on Rosh Hashanah talking about the fact that we should care and be engaged with what was happening in Israel and that they were really deeply under threat.

([14:30](#)):

And I used a story that comes from the Talmud about conjoined twins. So conjoined twins is a one body two-headed person. And the rabbis, they talk about these conjoined twins in the Talmud. And there of course, their burning question is whether or not this person has to wrap two sets of tefillin or only have to do one. But part of what they're trying to figure out is, is this two people because we've got two heads or is it one person because it's got one body, one heart? And that's a real question that had, they were looking at it from a particular lens and they take the answer for this from something that King Solomon taught, which was when also presented with conjoined twins about the inheritance. Did they get two portions of inheritance or one same question came up for King Solomon. His response was to pour boiling hot water on one of the heads and see if the other head screams. Okay, it feels like a pretty cruel response. This is the same king who also suggested cutting a baby and have to figure out it's trueness...

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch (15:31)

...Right right...

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl ([15:32](#)):

But I was arguing that when the other head screams for the one that is getting hot water boiled in it, you were reminded that actually you're all part of one body. You share one beating heart, you have one soul that you're sharing even if you've got two heads. And I was arguing that the American Jewish community, which has 7 million Jews, and Israel, which has 7 million Jews, we are the kind of two heads of the larger, wider Jewish worldwide community, even though there are another million Jews everywhere else. But it's got two big heads. And I would argue that before October 7th, not everyone was convinced that we were one--sharing one heart. We kind of didn't feel the pain of our Israeli

brothers and sisters with judicial reform. And then the worst test happened and we saw a pain rained down on our brothers and sisters, the other head on October 7th, and suddenly we were weeping and we never want to see that happen.

[\(16:33\)](#):

We wish we could take it back, but what we learned is that we share a soul. And that has been a source of tremendous strength and inspiration and deep love, I think, for the Jewish community in a strong way. Of course, there are people who didn't have that response, and we know that. And that's really also been something that we've been struggling with. And I do feel that my role as a rabbi, I have my traditional job pestering to my community and leading and so many other things. I do feel like there's been kind of another full-time job of Israel engagement and fighting antisemitism that has been added to my plate, and I think every clergy feels that.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(17:16\)](#):

Yeah, thank you for sharing that text. It really, the image resonates for me, right? I was in Israel when the caskets, when the bodies of the Bibas family came home. I was there spending a week there representing the Movement with the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, and we were at Hostage Square right as all of that was happening and unfolding. And earlier in the week, Reuven Rivlin, past president of Israel, spoke to our group and he did sort of a redux on his theory, his speech that he's made in the past around the different tribes of Israel and emphasize that we as North American Jewish leaders we're really like another tribe, right? So it's another way of thinking about that image, that metaphor that you were sharing about the one heart and the two heads. But I want to dig in a little bit more on what you mentioned about not everyone felt that way, right?

[\(18:13\)](#):

I think that a couple months ago, a new CCAR Journal came out in honor of our teacher, Rabbi David Ellenson, may his memory be for a blessing, and I wrote a piece in that journal talking about covenant and our connections with each other. And the piece that I was playing with in that was that we are in covenant not as individuals, but as a people. And that two heads, one heart all connected with each other and we're in a, people have that sense of ahm with people we don't agree with. We're in that in all of the ways that we wrestle with that, whether it's sects or streams or denominations who might not consider us fully Jewish rabbis, leaders in that way or people who are thinking to kind of count themselves out from connection with Israel and all of those different pieces. I'm just curious how you are thinking about all of those different threads and streams within a really a large and diverse community that you lead, and also some of that more public facing work that you were mentioning about what do we do about bringing together people when they come from such diverse different places.

[\(19:31\)](#):

When I know, and we've sort of established that this is where you're coming from, that we're in that connection in that peoplehood and that community together.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl [\(19:40\)](#):

I just want to name that even within one stream, you have so much diversity, obviously, but I mean, here's the good and bad news. I mean, for as long as there have been Jews, there have been different groups of Jews, some of whom always look at some other group of Jews and say they're not Jewish

enough or they're outside the tent, for some reason. Our rabbis tell us that this is why the temple was destroyed, was like sectarianism and hate between groups of Jews and basis of sinat hinam and hatred. And there was infighting between Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, zealots, the Hanukkah story. We could just go through countless examples of the fact that this is the challenge of not having a hierarchy of command and dogma that's legislated from a central place. I would say though that this is a feature, not a bug. So if we have always understood as Jews that there are going to be multiple ways to understand revelation and all the subsequent ways that we can be Jewish in the world, then we can see that diversity as our strength, not as our weakness, and the fact that we have the muscles to engage in that kind of debate and civil dissent and being able to argue without demonizing.

[\(20:55\)](#):

I think this is part of the Jewish DNA that we need to both practice and model for the world. So I say with regularity that I'm deeply proud of the fact that Central Synagogue is a diverse place, and I could give you all the different ways it's diverse, but for this moment I'll just say we are politically and ideologically diverse. And I'm not sure that every community is like that, and it can at times make my job more challenging, but it 100% makes me a better rabbi and a better human being and more intellectually honest. And I am convinced that when you are in a monoculture, when you are in a group that only thinks in one way, it actually breeds extremism because you just kind of keep feeding off each other and you have no countervailing force to actually make you look at that in a different way.

[\(21:42\)](#):

So I have forces all the time that are constantly challenging where I'm coming from. That sharpens my thinking all the time. Our base model of learning is hevruta, meaning you don't sit there and think on your own, and you don't just sit there and think with people who think exactly like you. That's just not the Jewish model. You actually want to find a hevruta, which I think in the best way is a sparring partner who sharpens your thinking. And so I think that the diversity of our community and the fact that we, it's not just that we argue--that would be very hard--but we also pray together and we sing together and we serve other human beings together. And when you do that, you're reminded that the many things we care about transcend our differences, and we don't have enough spaces like that. I think churches and synagogues in our country were those spaces, historically, where people kind of gathered across lines of maybe political difference and served something that was transcendent. And I still think that the unit of a house of worship can be those places, and I'm very proud that I think Central does that, and I think many synagogues do, and it's incredibly important that we actually create a tone in which the diversity of our communities can be maintained, which doesn't mean that we don't take principled stands that sometimes make some people very unhappy. It's just how you do it.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch [\(22:59\)](#):

Yeah, it's rarer and rarer for sure, just because we're talking about Israel, thinking about monoculture. I remember going on a tiyul, on a trip one time to a JNF forest in the north, and they showed us here, we planted acres and acres of the exact same pine tree over and over again, and the forest died. It didn't live because it was contrived. It was beautiful. That was the goal was to add trees and to add greenery. But they learned from that that they had to take different techniques and to plant forests that more resembled how a natural forest comes up. We are both on the slate for the Reform Movement for the World Zionist Congress, and we will be sharing out this episode when we're in the active voting period. So I want to make sure that we get a chance to talk a little bit about what that means for folks who may be less familiar with it, and also to make sure that we encourage folks to vote. And I'd love to hear a little bit about what it means personally to you to be on that slate.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl ([24:03](#)):

I feel so deeply honored to be on the slate for Voting Reform, and I think at a time when people feel a lot of helplessness and despair to be able to impact what's happening in Israel, I just want to remind people that this is a tangible important action that they can make that actually makes a difference. And it is both an action in Israel because the votes help distribute hundreds of millions of dollars of funds that come from the Jewish Agency to organizations that, and so the more votes that go to Reform, the more the money will be distributed to organizations that embody the values that our Reform Movement value, which include egalitarian women's issues and issues of dignity of all peoples and religious pluralism. So it is deeply important in terms of sort of the external impact it will have for you to vote.

([25:00](#)):

But I also don't want to discount. It's important internally because we know that what maintains hope is being able to take actions that can make a difference. So it's also saying something to you to go and take the effort and spend the \$5 to vote and to say, this is what I stand for. And I think it makes an important statement to Israel that Reform Jews care about what's happening in Israel. So these are really, really important reasons to take the five minutes it takes and the \$5 to vote. And I would be grateful if you send me and Rabbi Hirsch to the World Zionist Congress, and there are many other people that you want to send from our Reform slate, and I hope you'll vote to help us represent the values that we care about in Israel and announce loudly to Israelis that Reform Jews are invested in what is happening in Israel. It's really one of the few ways that we can make a loud and strong impactful message that actually has financial resources behind it. So I hope that we will convince you all to take the time to vote.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([26:02](#)):

Thank you. Yes, I couldn't agree more, and I was just recently at the National Institutions in Jerusalem and spending some time there with the leaders that in the past election five years ago, we were able to seat through the great turnout and the voting that we had. And it really, it is concrete, it is budget lines. It is making sure that there's attention to programming around women's rights and gender equity and care for our environment, and also making sure that the peace and security for Israelis and all people who live there are really recognized and honored and that our values are there. And I really also agree that people are looking for something that they can do right now, and this is something that they can do that will really truly have an impact. I want to make sure that we have a chance to talk about Esther who brings the theme and the frame for this podcast.

([27:01](#)):

The name of the podcast is Just For This, based on the really height of the drama in the Purim story. And we're certainly in Purim season when Mordechai comes to Esther and says, who knows? Maybe it's just for this moment, you find yourself in a position of leadership. And now in the third season of the podcast, I'm just really delighted in speaking with interesting and thoughtful leaders about how they connect to Esther's character and perhaps see something either a particular moment or the seat that they're in reflected in her journey, especially folks who think deeply about text, just how you connect with her character, either that particular moment in the text or something else from Esther's journey in the Purim story.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl ([27:48](#)):

I think that is just a pivotal line and moment of drama in that story. And I relate very much to her sense of, let's call it humility. Who am I to do this? And I think women more quickly go to that response, whereas men will say, of course I should. And women are often like, well, who am I to do this? Who am I

to take that seat at the table? Who am I to speak up? Who am I to fill this role? I love the teaching of Alan Morinis who talks about the mussar midah of anavah, of humility. And it is not meekness, it is not lowliness. It is not self-abasement in many ways. When you diminish yourself in that way, that's its own form of narcissism. And instead, because it's still making it all about you as opposed to what the moment requires, which is bigger than you, he says, no less than your place, no more than your space.

[\(28:50\)](#):

So basically you need to take up your appropriate space. And at times that has to be pretty big. Here you have this woman who I understand felt like, who am I? I got picked because I was the prettiest. That's what the text says. He liked me for some reason. But the bottom line is she's now the queen and she's got to take up her appropriate space in this moment when the moment calls for it. And I will share one quick story. I had just been named the Senior Rabbi at Central Synagogue, and it was 2014. And I was asked to do the blessings at the White House for the Hanukkah party. And I actually initially said no. And I said to my husband, I was like, I know I'm just being asked because I'm a Korean female rabbi and they just think that this is great, that I'm a woman and I'm leading a big community and that I'm not white.

[\(29:50\)](#):

And my husband was like, are you crazy? He was like, yeah, that's exactly why you have to say yes. And he is like, it doesn't matter if you think you're some sort of token pick, if there is some tokenism. He's like, you are in this role now. You are leading this community. You need to say yes to this. Take up your appropriate space. So I went back and said, okay, I think I'm going to do this. And I don't mean as like, it wasn't a false humility, there was a part of me that just like, who am I to do this? Or feeling that somehow I got picked for the other reasons. But I think that that feeling is very recognizable to me. And so I think that we need to do a better job of taking up the space we need to take up.

Rabbi Liz P.G. Hirsch ([30:38](#)):

I am your host, Rabbi Liz Hirsch, CEO of Women of Reform Judaism, and you've been listening to Just For This. Check us out on most social media platforms @justforthispodcast. You can also follow Women of Reform Judaism @WRJ1913. Our show is produced by Sheir and Shim, LLC. Special thanks to Lisa Pincus Hamroff, Aly Rubin, Rabbi Neil Hirsch, Lior, and Mikah. Jen King designed our logo, and Eric Shimelones wrote our theme music. Thanks for listening. We'll have more just for this moments next time.