

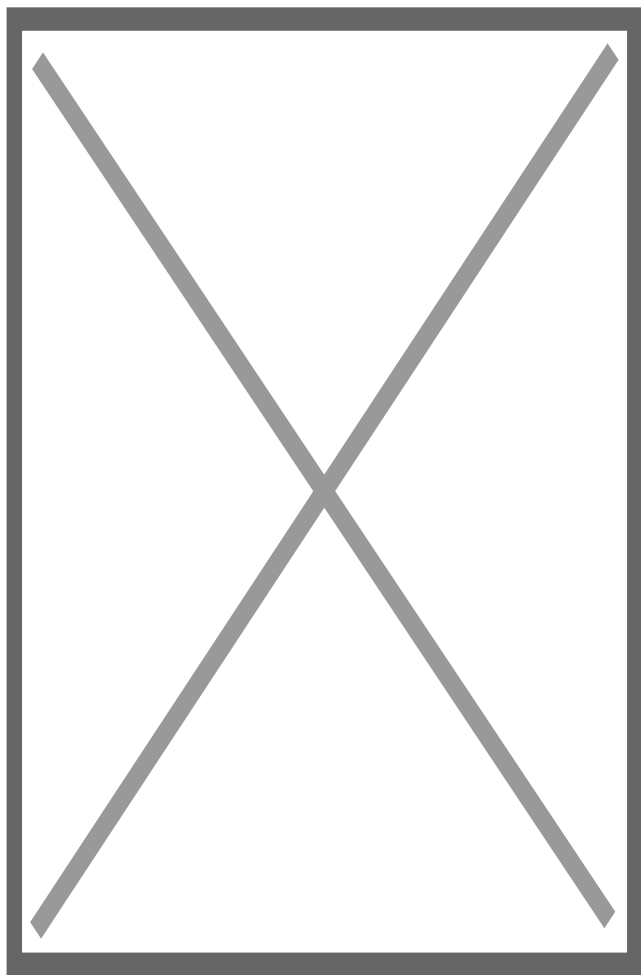
A rabbi's unlikely path

Angela Buchdahl writes honestly about her accomplishments, her hardest moments, and the routine difficulties of showing up in Jewish spaces with a Korean face.

by [Beth Kissileff](#) in the [June 2026](#) issue

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In Review



Heart of a Stranger

An Unlikely Rabbi's Story of Faith, Identity, and Belonging

By Angela Buchdahl

Pamela Dorman Books

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How does a Korean-born American citizen raised in a minuscule Jewish community in a state where Jews are 1 percent of the population become the rabbi of one of the largest Jewish congregations in the world? *Heart of a Stranger* tells the story of Angela Buchdahl's spiritual formation as a Reform Jewish rabbi and cantor whose face reflects the Korean features of her Buddhist mother.

Buchdahl is best known for her 2023 baccalaureate address at Stanford University, in which she recounted her role in the hostage negotiations after an armed man entered a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, in January 2022. But these well-known parts of her story emerged from skills and training gained steadily over the course of her career, which *Heart of a Stranger* recounts. At the end of each of the book's 31 chapters, Buchdahl teaches readers about a Jewish concept: *simcha* (joy), *mashber* (crisis), *hevruta* (sparring partner), *chesed* (kindness), *kadosh* (holiness), and so on. In this way, she provides not only a memoir but a primer on Jewish vocabulary and values.

Buchdahl is unafraid to speak honestly about controversial topics. When she was invited to speak at the Reform movement's 2017 convention in Dallas during the first Trump administration's Muslim ban, she says, "I was personally grappling with how to use my pulpit to reject America's barring of a people based on religion." She spoke about the meaning of sanctuary, which many of her congregants interpret as a place that should remain free from political stances. She explained that the Talmud (Berachot 34b) teaches that a space with windows is the only place where a Jew should pray. Her understanding of this text is that "windows also summon us to see the world beyond our walls and allow others to see what we are doing." Thus, she concluded, a sanctuary should be a place where one is willing to be challenged and to be attentive to the outside world.

Heart of a Stranger displays a leader who is willing to reveal her vulnerability by writing about her own limitations. For example, Buchdahl began her education learning to be a cantor instead of a rabbi, mainly so she and her husband could remain in the same region when both were in school. She did not do well at her first recital, she writes: "I couldn't glide my chest voice into my head voice, and I cracked like a prepubescent boy at his bar mitzvah." But her female mentor reassured her, "What moves people is an honest, pure kavvanah [intention] in your prayer-leading. This can't be taught. What people compliment me for when I pray is exactly what I see in you." Buchdahl freely shares about her most difficult moments as well as the encouragement from others that helped her learn from them.

In speaking of her life as a parent, Buchdahl is self-deprecating, noting that her children joke that "without my career, I would have been an overbearing helicopter parent." She tells the story of a time when her eight-year-old daughter, Rose, fell on the playground and needed a parent to come to the emergency room. Her husband was out of town, so Buchdahl rushed to the hospital. The x-rays took so long that Buchdahl had to skip dinner and go straight to her evening event: speaking on work-life balance, on a panel with Anne-Marie Slaughter. At the end of the chapter, Buchdahl reflects on the concept of *tisomet lev* (attention), noting that the phrase literally means to "place your heart." She writes:

When Rose was small and she really wanted to say something important, she would walk over to me, take both my cheeks into her little hands, and turn my face to look directly at hers. . . . When Rose grabbed my face in her hands, she didn't just want me to listen to her story; she wanted my heart in it.

Buchdahl concludes the chapter with a suggestion for readers: "So, as you set your priorities, think hard about where you are placing your heart."

Buchdahl freely admits that her journey is unique—and that she has been fortunate to find mainly encouragement from teachers and mentors. True, when she applies for a senior rabbi job at a large congregation, a congregant in a powerful role tells her the congregation needs to be led by an Ashkenazi rabbi, discounting the fact that Buchdahl's Jewish father is Ashkenazi. (Reform Judaism accepts patrilineal descent of Jewish identity.) "What he meant," she discerns, "was that Central's senior rabbi should be 'white.'" Still, despite the routine difficulties of showing up in Jewish spaces with a Korean face, Buchdahl finds herself becoming a visible leader in Reform Judaism.

Both this book and Buchdahl's rabbinate are fine examples of the vibrant life that emerges when people who haven't traditionally been given leadership roles are encouraged. Her embodiment of Jewish values demonstrates why inclusion, rather than exclusion, builds and strengthens communities.