

## **Elevating Judaism from Appointment to Wallpaper**

**Stuart Botwinick**

**March 6, 2026**

Shabbat Shalom.

Usually, when you see me, I am the man with the clipboard—or at least the mental equivalent of one. As your executive director, my brain is naturally wired to think about the “how” of our community: Are the lights on? Is the budget balanced? Did the catering arrive? For many of us in New York, Jewish life can feel like a series of *appointments*. We put it on the calendar, we drive to the building, we “do” Jewish for an hour or two, and then we go back to our “regular” lives.

But over the last few months, I had the incredible privilege of stepping out of that role—twice. First, I traveled with my wife, Dana, on a Reform Birthright trip for adults. Then, in February, I joined a mission for synagogue executive directors funded by UJA-Federation.

On these trips, for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t the one in charge. I was a participant. And in that shift from “leader” to “traveler,” I realized something profound: Being Jewish is so much bigger than the four walls of any single building or the checkboxes on a religious to-do list.

The “Wallpaper” of the Homeland

In America, we have a tendency to measure Judaism with a yardstick. We often fall into “The Authenticity Trap,” where we judge our own Jewishness based on how much Hebrew we know or how strictly we follow the law. But in Israel, I saw a different measure of Jewishness. There, Judaism isn’t an appointment; it’s the *wallpaper*.

I spent more than two weeks there and, ironically, I barely did anything “conventionally” Jewish. I didn’t spend my days in a sanctuary. Yet, I felt more Jewish than ever. Why? Because it was everywhere. It was in the Jerusalem Ministry conference room, where the names of the 12 tribes were etched into the walls. It was at the fish counter in the *shuk*, where a man with a long, flowing Orthodox beard was deftly taking orders for sea bream.

And, of course, it was in the “kosher golden arches.” There is something uniquely wonderful about eating at McDonald’s—only to realize that they don’t serve cheeseburgers. Not because of a religious decree from the manager, but because it’s just the atmosphere of the country. It’s “American” life, but with a Jewish soul. In Israel, it’s not about *measuring your level of observance*; it’s about being *home*.

The Family Business: Unity in Action

During both of these trips, I had the wonderful opportunity to visit my son, Greg, who is currently studying for his MBA at Tel Aviv University. Seeing him build a life there really drove home how “normal” Jewish life can be. Greg actually came home for his intersession last Thursday, just before the

recent escalations broke out, and having him back while my mind was still in Israel made me reflect even more on the nature of our “tribe.”

Because, we *are* a tribe. I saw it when Dana and I worked on a farm that had lost its labor force after October 7. We stood in the dirt, hands-on, helping to sustain the land. I saw it at Yad Sarah, where 6,000 volunteers provide medical equipment to their neighbors, and at Shalva, which provides world-class care for families with special needs.

In these places, the labels we use in New York simply melt away. They don’t ask if you are Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox before they hand you a crate of lemons or a medical device. You are family. In Israel, there wasn’t one single moment where I felt that being a “different kind of Jew” was something to be embarrassed about. That sense of *Am Yisrael*—the People of Israel—as a single, united organism is something I wish I could bottle up and bring back to Long Island.

### Being Our Authentic Selves

That brings me to a difficult truth. Here in New York, and specifically in areas like Great Neck, I know that some of us feel a certain pressure. We see the many Orthodox or more traditional Jewish communities around us, and sometimes a “holier than thou” sentiment can creep in—either from others or from our own inner critics. We worry that because we are Reform, we are “Jewish-lite” or that our traditions are somehow less valid. Some in our community even feel self-conscious that we aren’t “the same” as the more traditional Jews down the road.

But my time in Israel taught me that there is no “correct” way to be a part of a family. When I met with Adir Schwartz, a deputy minister in Jerusalem, he said: “The middle-left and the middle-right are a lot closer than the middle-left is to the extreme-left, or the middle-right is to the extreme-right.”

The same is true for our identity. We shouldn’t let the extremes of observance dictate how we feel about our own souls. We are an authentic, vibrant, and essential part of the Jewish people. Our Judaism is not defined by what we *don’t* do; it is defined by the values we *live*.

### Moving Toward the Future

This sense of “living our values” is exactly what’s guiding us as a congregation right now. Just as I saw in Israel—where Judaism survives and thrives because it’s resilient and adaptable—we are doing the same.

As we look toward the changes in our own synagogue space, we aren’t just making a real estate decision; we are making a *mission* decision. We are choosing strength, vitality, and stability over standing still. We are ensuring that our “wallpaper”—the Jewish life we create together—is vibrant and sustainable for years to come. Our story is not about the square footage of a building; it is about the strength of the tribe that lives within it. Like the volunteers at Yad Sarah or the students at Tel Aviv University, we are proving that Jewish life is about people and purpose.

## Making Judaism Your Personal “Wallpaper”

So, how do we make Judaism more of a “wallpaper” on a personal level? It starts by realizing that many things you do every day are, in fact, incredibly Jewish.

- Do you value hospitality and making guests feel welcome? *That is Hachnasat Orchim. This a mitzvah, a sacred responsibility!*
- Do you prioritize children’s education—your own or those in the community, encouraging them to ask “why”? *That is the very foundation of Jewish study.*
- Do you feel a responsibility to show up for a friend in crisis? *That is the Jewish spark of Gemilut Hasadim (acts of loving-kindness).*

In Israel, I saw that a Reform Jew picking lemons in a field is just as essential to the story as a Haredi man at the fish counter. When you live with integrity, when you care for your community, and when you show up for each other, you are “doing” Jewish. You are the wallpaper.

Conclusion: Belonging to the Tribe

It was a joy to see the land through Dana’s eyes, to see Greg thriving, and to visit with Rabbi Tara, Rabbi Meir, Adina, and Gavi—and to know that my daughter, Layna, will be going soon with her school to culminate her high school experience. These moments remind me that the “homeland” is about people and connection.

So, I challenge us tonight: Let’s drop the yardstick. Let’s stop measuring our “level” of Judaism and start honoring and celebrating our *belonging, doing, and being*. You are part of a *tribe*. You are part of a global family that embraces every kind of Jew imaginable.

As you move forward, go with strength—living Jewishly every day in whatever convention or unconventional model works for you. As we move forward, let us go with a focused clear mission. We are moving together as a family who knows that our home isn’t just a place, it’s the connection we share and the pride we feel in being exactly who we are. We are Jewish not by appointment, but by creating and seeing the wallpaper, Judaism in every day.

Shabbat Shalom.