

SHUKI TAYLOR

A Judaism of Doing

*Religious practice is not supposed
to be convenient*



ITTING at my computer right now, I am only a couple of clicks away from every Jewish text I could ever need. Torah, Talmud, commentaries, modern scholarship—it's all there, free and instantly searchable. This technological innovation represents an extraordinary democratization of access to the Jewish canon, something that all Jews should celebrate. Yet the abundance prompts an unsettling question: When everything is immediately accessible, do we actually engage more deeply? Abundance and engagement are not the same thing; the proliferation of content does not necessarily produce the cultivation of connection.

The shift from physical to digital alters the very nature of encounter. Acquiring a book once involved the slow ritual of

entering a store, browsing shelves, handling volumes, and choosing one to bring home. The transaction was embodied; the book became part of one's physical and intellectual landscape. A digital download replicates content but not the tactile and spatial cues that embed it in memory.

That same transformation—from culling to convenience—has been reshaping *all* aspects of Jewish life for some time now. One can now join a Torah class taught on the other side of the world and even go there to spend the eight days of Passover in a lavish, all-inclusive resort, with no pesky Passover prep. Prefab sukkot, which take no more than a few minutes to erect, can be purchased. These kinds of conveniences make Jewish life easier and less cumbersome, but they also replace acts once performed with our own hands. Where Jewish life once demanded the hammering of sukkah boards, the turning over of a kitchen for Passover, or the hum of *hevruta* study in the same room, it now often offers passive, even private, participation: watching, receiving, attending without making.



Such convenience in Jewish ritual would have been anathema to our ancestors. Historically, Judaism has resisted the separation of idea from act. The Torah presents itself not as a theoretical treatise but as a corpus of narratives and laws in which memory and practice are interwoven. This interweaving teaches Judaism as an embodied practice. The prohibitions of the Sabbath, for example, are a set of 39 actions that were said to be necessary for the building of the *mishkan* in the desert. They are prohibited on the Sabbath as a reflection of how active and effortful Judaism was during the work week. On Passover, we are told to imagine that we've literally baked matzohs and taken them with us on our flight from Egypt. And we remember our desert wanderings

by building temporary dwelling places to remind us of the fragility of shelter. These embodied performances are not supplementary to belief; they are commanded as mechanisms by which belief is sustained, experienced, and transmitted.

Anthropologists of ritual note that physical participation creates “muscle memory” of meaning. The act of kneading challah, fastening a mezuzah, or chanting Torah aloud does more than symbolize an idea—it anchors that idea in sensory experience, making it retrievable in ways that words alone cannot achieve. When we outsource these acts, we risk turning a lived tradition into an observed one, exchanging participation for consumption.

This erosion reflects two converging trends in contemporary Western life that strike at Judaism’s foundational logic. The first is the systematic outsourcing of functions once performed directly by individuals and communities — preparing food, repairing homes, caring for children, even generating ideas. The second is digital imperialism: the pervasive migration of human activity, social interaction, and knowledge production into digital domains controlled by centralized platforms. This is not merely a shift in medium; it’s a reconfiguration of how reality is experienced, mediated, and valued.

Together, these dynamics produce a perfect storm for embodied traditions. For Judaism—whose formative practices are enacted through physical, communal, and time-bound ritual—the drift toward outsourced and digitized forms of life risks severing the link between knowing and doing that has always been central to Jewish continuity.

Consider what happens when embodied practices are displaced. Even the act of charity is described in Leviticus in labor terms:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your har-

vest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am YHWH your God. (Leviticus 19:9–10)

Leaving part of a harvest for the poor engages the hands in gathering and in holding back, the feet in walking the edges of a field. Establishing an *eruv* calls neighbors to stretch wire, tie knots, and trace the boundary together. Study in a *beit midrash* fills the air with voices, pages turning, questions traded across a table. Practices of restraint—fasting, avoiding certain foods, setting aside specific garments—mark the body and the calendar alike.

All of these practices and more define Jewish life as one lived in sensory service. When such sense-rich practices are displaced—purchased as services, simulated on screens, or reduced to information—their formative power weakens, as does the experience of Judaism itself. The skills they cultivate—building, coordinating, chanting, hosting, restraining—atrophy. The spatial and temporal literacy they confer—marking boundaries, reading the calendar with the body—fades. The social bonds they generate—reciprocity, shared labor, mutual obligation—thin.

In place of a culture that learns by doing, communities begin to outsource not only the acts themselves but the knowledge of how they are done, eroding the capacity to transmit tradition without mediation. Institutions drift toward content provision rather than communities of practice; participation is tallied as attendance rather than enactment.

The lived experience changes fundamentally. Jewish life becomes something received rather than made. Fewer people know how to lead a song without a screen, or read a text aloud in the company of others. Fewer kitchens smell of Shabbat bread that rose there, fewer neighborhoods gather to mark the limits of their space, fewer hands

prepare the rituals they later “attend.” The result is a community more dependent on institutions and vendors, less bound to its members, less agile in sustaining itself, and less confident in its ability to carry the tradition forward.

This is the risk: A Judaism that is less inhabitable will, in time, be less inhabited.



If the core threat is the slow displacement of embodied Jewish life, then the strategy to counter the threat is clear: Reclaim a Judaism of doing. This means restoring the tradition’s core operating system — the coupling of idea and act — so that Jewish life is once again generated and sustained through things that people build, make, bake, wear, mark, give, and voice together.

Reclaiming a Judaism of doing is not nostalgia for a pre-digital world, or rejection of tools that expand access. It’s recognition that without action, the tradition becomes a set of ideas without material anchors. It requires a cultural, educational, and institutional commitment to measure Jewish vitality not by attendance, streaming numbers, or memberships, but by the number of people actively engaged in six core domains of practice.

Building—Whether assembling a sukkah, raising a chupah, repairing a section of a communal *eruv*, or setting posts for a shared garden, building leaves a tangible mark on the Jewish landscape and creates shared memory among those who lifted, measured, and fastened alongside you. It cultivates problem-solving, collaboration, and spatial literacy that carry into every corner of Jewish communal life.

Making—From baking challah and matzoh, to binding the four species, planting trees, weaving a tallit, or composing a nigun, the

act of making ties intention to process. The maker knows: This came together because I brought it into being. That knowledge reenforces Jewish agency and continuity with those who made before and those who will use it after.

Wearing—Donning a tallit, wrapping tefillin, pinning a Magen David to a jacket, wearing white on Yom Kippur, or dressing in Purim costumes places belonging directly on the body. Wearing makes identity visible and claimed; helping another to do the same binds her sense of self to the collective.

Marking—Lighting Shabbat candles, affixing a mezuzah, blowing shofar, immersing in the mikvah or turning over a kitchen for Passover transforms ordinary time and space into something charged with meaning. Disciplines of restraint—fasting, avoiding certain foods at set times—also mark the calendar and body. Marking teaches that the ordinary is not neutral; it can be shaped and sanctified through deliberate action.

Giving—Delivering *mishloach manot* on Purim, bringing food to a shiva house, hosting guests for a holiday meal, volunteering at a soup kitchen, or sharing produce with neighbors are tactile, relational forms of generosity. These acts weave reciprocity into community life and cultivate humility, empathy, and trust.

Voicing—Chanting Torah, reciting the Shema, leading blessings, studying aloud in *hevruta*, singing zemirot, or answering Kaddish turns words into shared sound. Voicing builds confidence, deepens learning, and binds individuals into a chorus larger than themselves. It makes each participant a co-creator of the community's soundscape.

When these domains guide Jewish life, transformation occurs at multiple levels. Individuals gain competence—knowing how to lead, prepare, and create without waiting for an intermediary. Communities develop interdependence, building shared life on reciprocal acts rather than purchased goods and services. Memory becomes embod-

ied, anchored in muscle, voice, and space rather than confined to books or screens. Jewish identity becomes visible and portable, expressed in objects, spaces, and skills that can be carried anywhere. The tradition itself becomes harder to outsource, harder to digitize, and harder to forget—because it lives in actions that require presence, human touch, and connection that cannot be streamed.

If we fail to act, the erosion will be gradual but decisive. Skills that once tied people to the tradition will wither. The ability to lead a service, host a holiday meal, or build a ritual space will become rare rather than common. Jewish identity will be flattened into consumable symbols, stripped of the muscle and memory that give it depth. Communities will be bound more by shared content than by shared labor, and the tradition—though still accessible—will become less inhabitable.



If this vision is to become reality, it must be translated into the daily and seasonal rhythms of Jewish life—planned for, funded, and measured. This requires a shift in how institutions imagine their role: from being providers of programs to being catalysts for participation, from curating experiences to equipping people to create them.

The following measures should be implemented by synagogues, JCCs, day schools, Hebrew schools, and any Jewish programming entities between and beyond. Further, they should become norms of communal expectation. Not all will be relevant to all, but all will be relevant to some.

Program for the Six Domains—Chart the calendar for moments of Building, Making, Wearing, Marking, Giving, and Voicing. Over the course of a year, every community member should have the chance to enter each domain through hands-on acts—raising a sukkah wall, shaping dough for Shabbat, marking time with candles or fasts,

giving in ways that involve touch and presence, and adding his voice to prayer or song.

Measure Participation, Not Just Presence— Success is not how many people sat in a room or tuned in, but how many actually did the act. A challah bake is only as alive as the number of people whose hands were in the dough; a Torah study circle is only as strong as the number of voices that read aloud.

Teach the Skills, Not Just the Symbols— Equip people to enact Jewish life without waiting for a professional. This might mean wood-working for sukkot, sewing for tallitot, voice coaching to lead blessings, or learning to plan, construct, and maintain an *eruv*. Skills are portable—they can travel with people anywhere Jewish life is lived.

Reclaim Home and Neighborhood as Jewish Space— The center of gravity should not be only in institutional buildings. Provide tools, training, and encouragement for members to bring rituals into homes and shared spaces— front-yard sukkot, kitchens prepared for Passover, neighborhood zemirot circles.

Fund and Celebrate Doing— Allocate resources to materials, tools, and training that make participation possible. Honor those who build, make, wear, mark, give, and voice— so that the story of the community is told through the actions people take together, not just the events they attend.



The danger facing Judaism today is not that Jewish life will vanish from view—it will remain infinitely searchable, streamable, and purchasable. The danger is that it will pass before our eyes without passing through our hands. The measure of a living tradition is not its digital footprint, but the imprint it leaves on bodies, rooms, and neighborhoods.

A Judaism of doing does not ask every person to master every practice. It asks each person to inhabit some of them deeply and to share with others that process of inhabiting. It asks communities to be places where skills are learned, acts are repeated, and memory is lodged in muscle and sound. And it insists that access alone is not the same as ownership—that the tradition belongs most fully to those who take part in building, making, wearing, marking, giving, and voicing it into being.

The future will not be secured by more content or more convenience. It will be secured by the stubborn, joyful work of participation—by acts that take time, space, and cooperation. For every ritual observed from a distance, there must be one enacted directly. For every experience consumed passively, there must be one brought into being by the people themselves.

If we can meet this moment with that resolve, the next generation will inherit not only the knowledge of what Judaism is, but the will—and the ability—to live it, together, in real time and shared space. Technology can extend the reach of Jewish life, but it cannot substitute for the doing. The charge is urgent: In an age when so much of life is outsourced to specialists or flattened onto screens, the antidote is to put the work—and the joy—back into our own hands.

Speaking of handiwork, in her beautiful short film *How to Make Challah*, filmmaker Sarah Rosen captures her aunt Jane baking challah for the first time, at the age of 81. The film is interspersed with cuts of a film Jane took 47 years prior, of her own grandmother Ida baking the same recipe, which she had learned from her mother, Sarah's great-great-grandmother. Ida laments, in 1975, "The women of today, they want everything readymade. They don't want to bother for nothing. They wouldn't bother with baking anything. They think you're crazy!" But Sarah, the great-granddaughter, bakes this recipe regularly, and we watch as she and her aunt Jane bond, joyfully and

effortlessly, growing closer through the collaboration than even they were before. The film is itself an act of transmission, exhibiting a practice that ties them to their foremothers and to each other. The message is so poignant that you can almost miss the part about the plant by the window that was once owned by Ida, and that's been watered by multiple members of the generations since. "It's been cut back many, many times," says Jane, "and many people have pieces of it." It's in their DNA. *

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