Dr. Dante Roulette grew up Christian but had long considered converting to Judaism.

“The biggest thing was finding a religious and spiritual practice that aligned with me more,” says the 41-year-old Shaker Heights native. “I just liked the idea that you are allowed to have a relationship with God that also kind of always questions and evaluates what that relationship is and what that practice means to you.”

Ian Lucash grew up in a Conservative Jewish household in New Jersey and moved to Northeast Ohio when he was 19. He’s always kept up with Jewish traditions but acknowledges there have been ups and downs in his level of observance and practice.

About five years ago, the two met, hit it off and decided to spend the rest of their lives together. They married on Sept. 19, 2015, and as a result of their bond, both are living more Jewishly than before.

Roulette officially converted to Judaism, and Lucash credits their relationship for living more observantly. Now, nearly every Friday, they make challah and light candles, and they’ve put up a sukkah for Sukkot the past two years.

“These are things that I hadn’t done for years,” Lucash says. “So, he stepped up my game.”

Despite the clarity of their own beliefs, when the Broadview Heights couple began considering having a child and how they would navigate incorporating Roulette’s non-Jewish family into their new family’s traditions, things became a bit more complicated.

Thus, when an opportunity arose to visit Israel on a 10-day trip with 19 other Northeast Ohio-based Jewish and interfaith couples grappling with similar questions, they applied.

On Sept. 7, 2017, they embarked on that trip through a national program called Honeymoon Israel. The excursion not only allowed them and the other couples to better understand their Jewish identities, but it encouraged them to explore their family histories, their connection to the Jewish community and their future.

Honeymoon Israel

Honeymoon Israel, which launched its first trips in May 2015, provides group, city-based, honeymoon-style trips to Israel for couples looking to explore their connections to Judaism. To launch its Northeast Ohio program, which started in 2017, it partnered with jHUB, a Cleveland Heights-based organization that aims to connect interfaith couples to Jewish life.

Nationally, about 70 percent of Honeymoon Israel couples are interfaith. Couples consisting of two people who were
both born Jewish and couples in which one partner converted to Judaism also make the trip. A stipulation to participating in Honeymoon Israel is at least one partner must have never been on another organized trip to Israel as a teen or adult.

“What we really are looking for are couples who have yet to make firm decisions of the way that they want to incorporate Judaism into their relationship, family or life,” says Rachel Zieleniec, vice president of marketing and communications at Honeymoon Israel, adding that it’s important Honeymoon Israel trips are reflective of the demographics of the community at large. “It’s important to us that it’s a healthy mix and balance of couples of diverse backgrounds because there is so much we can learn from each other.”

The trip aims to incorporate Israeli staples, such as visiting Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and hiking Masada, but also includes visits to Christian sites and Arab-Israeli communities to better educate on diversity, politics and interfaith aspects of the country.

Additionally, Honeymoon Israel aims to be luxurious, including alone time for couples and special romantic components. These elements help differentiate it from other organized trips, like Birthright, which often engage participants in back-to-back adventures, leave little time for sleep and involve scrappily moving around hotels and sites.

Samia Mansour, communications and events manager for jHUB, who was on the Northeast Ohio trip along with jHUB’s director, Rabbi Melinda Mersack, says the outing allowed couples to have conversations about their cultures and religions many had not yet addressed in their relationship.

“For them to connect with people who are not only at the same stage in life but also have some of the same struggles coming from an interfaith family, or maybe a family where they are not so connected to Jewish life, and to experience Israel together with couples who are similar, was so wonderful,” Mansour says.

Interfaith questions

For Lee and Danielle Steinbock, a Shaker Heights couple, Honeymoon Israel came at an ideal time – after the birth of their first child, Lennox, 2, but before further expanding their family.

Lee, 33, who was raised Jewish and attended The Temple-Tifereth Israel in Beachwood growing up, felt the trip would provide a good opportunity to engage Danielle, a Lutheran, about Judaism.

The couple first met at Panini’s in Cleveland Heights about nine years ago and agree Danielle’s understanding of Judaism has grown significantly since then. They still laugh thinking about one of the first times they hung out, when Danielle baked pizza and left meat ingredients on the side since she was unsure of whether Lee kept kosher.

Lee is the grandchild of a Holocaust survivor, and though he says he’s not personally attached to organized religion, cultural Judaism is meaningful to him. Differentiating between religious and cultural Judaism is a concept Danielle grasped gradually.
“It was talked about fairly regularly, mostly because I grew up in an area where I didn’t know anyone who was Jewish,” says Danielle, who works as an operating room nurse at Hillcrest Hospital in Mayfield Heights. “It was a lot of curiosity questions for me.”

When they were married on Oct. 6, 2012, at Danielle’s parents’ farm in Brewster, Minn., the couple had an interfaith wedding. A pastor and rabbi co-officiated, although finding a rabbi who would co-officiate for an interfaith couple who would not commit to raising children entirely Jewish was a struggle. They ended up flying in a willing rabbi from Albany, N.Y.

“It’s pretty safe to guess it was the largest gathering of Jewish people in Brewster’s history,” says Lee, who is a project manager at The Freedonia Group in Mayfield Village.

The Steinbocks decided they would educate their children on both families’ religions, and the Honeymoon Israel trip provided a chance to explore their feelings in greater depth with other couples. Danielle says going to Israel with the group helped her better understand cultural Judaism and provided insight into how couples in the same situation were handling related issues.

“It’s nice because we have a resource,” she says. “We don’t just have a temple or pastor or someone to go to, we can go to a friend who’s in a similar situation and say, ‘hey how are you guys doing Easter and Passover?’”

For Lee, a favorite trip moment was having dinner with families of Moroccan and Tunisian ethnicities in Beit Shean, Cleveland’s sister city, as well as going to natural springs outside the city. Although he had been to Israel on group trips twice before, seeing the country with his partner provided a new experience. He was especially glad she had the opportunity to gain “an appreciation of what it’s like to be a Christian in a Jewish world, as opposed to a Jew in a Christian world.”

The Steinbocks agree the trip wasn’t about trying to convince members of the couples to convert, commit to raising kids in a solely Jewish household, to become more observant or other common stereotypes about group Israel trips.

“Really, 100 percent genuinely, that was not the case,” Lee says. “They really wanted to create this community that I think they were very successful in doing over a very short period of time.”

*Traditions and transitions*

Roulette and Lucash met on Match.com and were married in Hershey, Pa., a location chosen for its proximal convenience for members of both families to attend after the pair got engaged in Hawaii. The small wedding comprised of three guests – Lucash’s brother and his girlfriend, and Roulette’s stepfather – as well as a mayor in a neighboring town as the officiant.

Since then, they’ve spent years forming their own traditions, which includes being members of Park Synagogue in Cleveland Heights and Pepper Pike as well as visiting synagogues wherever they travel. Though Roulette and Lucash don’t face the challenge of incorporating multiple religions into their home as the Steinbocks, the trip still came at a critical time in their relationship.
Just a month after the Honeymoon Israel trip, their family grew when a newborn foster child was placed with them. Should they adopt him, they plan on raising him Jewish. However, having gained perspective by spending time with interfaith couples on the trip, they would also honor both their foster son’s heritage and the religions and heritages of non-Jewish members of their extended family.

“Seeing how (the other couples) were doing it in their marriages, reaffirmed how we could do it with our extended families,” Lucash says.

Although Lucash, who is a social worker and assistant treatment director at Specialized Alternatives for Families and Youth in Shaker Heights, had visited Israel before on a group trip, he says going to the Western Wall with his spouse was meaningful both for their relationship and because of the familial significance the time held. The visit took place the day after the 15th anniversary of his father’s death, and to commemorate it, he wrote a prayer on a family photo and placed it in the wall.

For Roulette, it was meaningful to visit Israel not just as a convert who had never been before, but because his late grandfather visited Israel and had often shared how special the experience was to him with his family.

“There is something amazing about walking into Israel the first time, kind of coming out of the tunnel and seeing Jerusalem for the first time,” says Roulette, who is a medical director for robotic surgery for Akron-based Summa Health. “On top of that, you get to go with 19 other couples who in some way, shape or form are experiencing the same thing you are, and (you can) have really pointed and meaningful conversations with your spouse or significant other and these other couples. And then you come back home and they are still there and you continue those conversations.”

Lasting bonds

Zielniec, whose Honeymoon Israel office is in Atlanta, says in addition to partnering locally with jHUB, they also receive funding from the Jewish Federation of Cleveland and are planning the second Cleveland trip for early winter in 2019.

She adds that in working with the Greater Cleveland community, she’s noticed a trend where at least one partner of a couple has been raised in Northeast Ohio, lived elsewhere much of their early adult life, and then move back to Cleveland once they were ready to raise a family. The area pulls people back at a critical life juncture, she says.

“A lot of couples are rooted there – Cleveland, Akron or Ohio in general,” says Zielniec, a graduate of Beachwood High School and the Joseph & Florence Mandel Jewish Day School in Beachwood. “It’s a great place to raise a family and so there are a lot of benefits to moving back.”

However, while such couples may have family around, it can be difficult to start over in terms of making friends when moving to a new place as an adult. Zielniec says a goal of Honeymoon Israel trips is to ensure people who have similar stories and backgrounds can navigate faith, culture and lifecycle changes together when they return home.

Several events have been hosted by jHUB since the trip concluded, on top of which both the Steinbocks and Lucash and Roulette say they’ve gotten together with the other couples on their own terms.

“Jewish Cleveland can be intimidating if you didn’t grow up in that environment, so Danielle and I haven’t been overly active,” Lee Steinbock says. “The trip has really, in my opinion, given us connections to a whole group of people that are in the exact same life situation as us. If we hadn’t gone to the other side of the world with them, we would have never met them.”

Mark your calendar

Honeymoon Israel’s next Cleveland trip will be from Jan. 10-20, 2019. Applications will be available for eligible couples from May 1 to June 17, 2018. To sign up to be notified when applications open or to check eligibility, visit honeymoonisrael.org/sign-up.