



Significant Times and Dates

Festivals

The Jewish Calendar

Jewish holidays or festivals (*yamim tovim*) are holidays observed by Jews throughout the Hebrew calendar and include religious, cultural, and national aspects. Some are derived from Biblical *mitzvot* (commandments), others from *rabbinic* mandates, while others commemorate Jewish history and the history of the State of Israel.

All Jewish holidays begin the evening before the date specified. This is because a Jewish day begins and ends at sunset, rather than at midnight. (It is inferred from the story of creation in Genesis, where it says, “And there was evening, and there was morning, one day”.)

Jewish holidays occur on the same dates every year in the Hebrew calendar, but the dates vary in the Gregorian calendar. This is because the Hebrew calendar is a lunisolar calendar (based on the cycles of both the moon and sun), whereas the Gregorian calendar is only a solar calendar.

The Jewish calendar is primarily lunar, with each month beginning on the new moon. There are approximately 12.4 lunar months in every solar year, so a 12-month lunar calendar loses about 11 days every year. To prevent the “drifting” of months and holy days, Hillel II, in the fourth century, established a fixed calendar based on mathematical and astronomical calculations. This calendar, still in use today, realigned the lunar calendar with the solar years.

Holidays of biblical and *rabbinic* (*Talmudic*) origin include

- The *Sabbath*
- *Rosh Chodesh*—The New Month
- *Rosh Hashanah*—The Jewish New Year
- *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*—Ten Days of Repentance
- *Tzom Gedalia*—Fast of Gedalia
- *Yom Kippur*—Day of Atonement
- *Sukkot*—Feast of Booths

- *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah* (celebrates the end of the cycle of reading the *Torah* and starting a new one: literally “rejoicing the *Torah*”)
- *Hanukkah*—Festival of Lights
- Tenth of *Tevet*
- *Tu Bishvat*—New Year of the Trees
- *Purim*—Festival of Lots
- *Ta’anit Esther*—Fast of Esther
- *Pesach*—Passover
- *Sefirah*—Counting of the *Omer*
- *Shavuot*—Feast of Weeks—*Yom HaBikurim*
- Mourning for Jerusalem: Seventeenth of *Tammuz* and *Tisha B’Av*

Israeli/Jewish National Holidays and Days of Remembrance

Yom HaShoah: Holocaust Remembrance Day is commemorated throughout the world. It is intended to ensure that the Jews and others who were victims of the Nazi Genocide are never forgotten.

Holidays celebrated in Israel and by some of the Diaspora Jews include the following:

- *Yom Hazikaron*: Memorial Day
- *Yom Ha’atzmaut*: Israel Independence Day
- *Yom Yerushalayim*: Jerusalem Day
- *Yom HaAliyah*: Aliyah Day
- A day to commemorate the expulsion of Jews from Arab lands and Iran

Descriptions of a Few of the More Significant and Popular Festivals and Special Days

Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year)

The Jewish New Year (*Rosh Hashanah*) is a time to begin introspection, looking back at the mistakes of the past year and planning the changes to make in the new year. No work is permitted on *Rosh Hashanah*. One of the most important observances of this holiday is hearing the sounding of the *shofar* (a ram’s horn which is blown somewhat like a trumpet) in the synagogue; while a popular observance during this holiday is eating apples dipped in honey, a symbol of the wish for a sweet new year. Another popular practice of the Jewish New Year is *tashlikh* (casting off). Jewish people walk to flowing water, such as a creek or river, on the afternoon of the first day and empty their pockets into the river, symbolically casting off their sins. (Throwing bread crumbs into the water is a popular alternative.)

Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur, meaning Day of Atonement is probably the most important holiday of the Jewish year. Many Jews who do not observe any other Jewish custom will refrain from work, will fast, and/or will attend synagogue services on this day. It is a day set aside to “afflict the soul,” in order to atone for the sins of the past year. According to the Jewish tradition, God has “books” in which he writes people’s names, indicating who will live and who will die, as well as who will have a good life and who will have a bad life, for the next year. On *Yom Kippur*, the judgment entered in these books is sealed. This day is, essentially, the last appeal: the last chance to change the judgment and to demonstrate repentance and make amends. *Yom Kippur* atones only for sins between man and God, not for sins against another person. To atone for sins against another person, one must first seek reconciliation with that person, righting the wrongs they committed against them if possible. That must all be done before *Yom Kippur*.

Yom Kippur is a complete *Sabbath*; no work can be performed on that day. It is a complete, 25-hour fast beginning before sunset on the evening before *Yom Kippur* and ending after nightfall on the day of *Yom Kippur*. The *Talmud* also specifies additional restrictions that are less well-known: washing and bathing, anointing one’s body (with cosmetics, deodorants, etc.), wearing leather shoes (Orthodox Jews routinely wear canvas sneakers under their dress clothes on *Yom Kippur*), and engaging in sexual relations are all prohibited on *Yom Kippur*. As always the case in Judaism, any of these restrictions can be lifted where a threat to life or health is involved. Most of the holiday is spent in the synagogue, in prayer. It is customary to wear white on the holiday, which symbolizes purity and calls to mind the promise that the sins shall be made as white as snow.



Figure 44: Breaking *Yom Kippur* Fast with Roti and Samosas

Sukkot

The Festival of *Sukkot* begins on the fifth day after *Yom Kippur*. *Sukkot* is a time for joy and celebration and is commonly referred to in Jewish prayer and literature as *Z'man Simchateinu*, the Season of our Rejoicing.

Sukkot is the third of the *Shalosh R'galim* or three pilgrimage festivals. Like *Passover* and *Shavu'ot*, *Sukkot* has a dual significance, one biblical/historical and one agricultural.

Historically, *Sukkot* commemorates the forty-year period during which the children of Israel were wandering the desert, living in temporary shelters. Agriculturally, *Sukkot* is a harvest festival.

The word *Sukkot* means booths, and refers to the temporary shelters in which Jews are expected to live during this holiday in memory of the period of wandering. *Sukkot* lasts for seven days.

The two days following the festival, *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah*, are separate holidays but are related to *Sukkot* and are commonly thought of as part of *Sukkot*. *Simchat Torah*, literally means Rejoicing in the *Torah* and marks the completion of the annual cycle of weekly *Torah* readings in the synagogue.

No work is permitted on the first and second days of the holiday. Work is permitted on the remaining days. These intermediate days on which work is permitted are referred to as *Chol Ha-Mo'ed*, as are the intermediate days of *Passover*.

Hanukah (Chanukah)

Hanukah or *Chanukah*, is the Jewish festival of rededication, which is also known as the Jewish festival of lights. It is an eight-day festival which commemorates the revolt of the Jews against Greek oppression in biblical times. Antiochus IV, the Greek ruler who was in control of the region at the time including the land of Judea, began to severely oppress the Jews in an attempt to control them. Jews were massacred and he prohibited the practice of the Jewish religion,



Figure 45: *Sukkot* 2010



Figure 46: First Night of *Hanukah*

and desecrated the Temple. The Jews eventually revolted and succeeded in regaining control of their land and the Temple was rededicated.

According to Jewish tradition, at the time of the rededication, there was very little oil left that had not been defiled by the Greeks. Oil was needed for the *menorah* (candelabrum) in the Temple, which was supposed to burn throughout the night every night. There was only enough oil to burn for one day yet, miraculously, it burned for eight days. An eight-day festival was declared to commemorate this miracle.

Hanukah is a traditional/historical holiday rather than a holiday of religious significance. It has become well-known and celebrated throughout the world because the festival usually falls in December around Christmas.

The only religious observance related to the holiday is the lighting of candles. The candles are arranged in a candelabrum called a *hanukiah*. Many people refer to the *hanukiah* incorrectly as a *menorah*. The name *menorah* is used only to describe the seven-branched candelabrum that was housed in the Jewish Temple.

The *hanukiah* holds nine candles: one for each night, plus a “servant candle” (*shamash*) at a different height. On the first night, one candle is lit using the *shamash* to light it. Each night, another candle is added.

It is traditional to eat fried foods on this holiday, because of the significance of oil to the holiday. This usually includes potato pancakes. The only traditional gift of the holiday is *gelt*, small amounts of money given to the children. Another tradition of the holiday is playing *dreidel*, which is marked with four Hebrew letters commemorating the historical miracle.

Purim

The festival of *Purim* is celebrated every year on the 14th of the Hebrew month of *Adar* (late winter/early spring). The festival commemorates the saving of the Jewish people in ancient Persia from Haman’s plot to wipeout Jews, as recorded in the *Megillah* (book of Esther).

Purim means “lots” in ancient Persian. The name of the holiday flows from Haman’s decision to throw lots to determine when he would carry out his genocidal scheme.

Purim celebrations are meant to be fun and lively. It is also traditional for children (and adults, if they desire) to dress up in costumes.



Figure 47: Chocolate *hamantaschen*

On the day before *Purim* (or on the Thursday before, when *Purim* is on a Sunday), it is customary to fast, commemorating Queen Esther's fasting and praying to God that the Jewish people be saved.

There are special observances or rituals that are part of the celebration of *Purim*. They are as follows:

- Reading the *Megillah* (book of Esther) which tells the story of the *Purim* miracle. Readings take place twice during the celebrations, once on the eve of *Purim* and again the following day.
- Giving money gifts to at least two less fortunate or poor persons.
- Offering gifts of two kinds of food to at least one person.
- Having a festive *Purim* feast—a traditional *Purim* food is *hamantaschen* (or *oznay haman*), three-cornered pastry filled with poppy seeds or another sweet filling.

Passover

Passover (*Pesach*) is one of the best known Jewish holidays, as much for its connection to Jewish redemption and the figure of Moses, as for its ties with Christian history (the Last Supper was a Passover meal). The name Passover refers to the fact that God “passed over” the houses of the Jews when he was slaying the firstborns of Egypt during the last of the ten plagues in the biblical Book of Exodus. The primary observances of Passover are related to the Jewish Exodus from Egypt after 400 years of slavery as told in the same book.

Passover lasts for seven days (eight days outside of Israel). The first and last days of the holiday (first two and last two outside of Israel) are days on which no work is permitted. Work is permitted on the intermediate days.

Many of the Passover observances still held were instituted in the Exodus story in the *Torah*. Probably the most significant observance involves the removal of leavened bread (*chametz*) from homes and property. *Chametz* includes anything made from the five major grains (wheat, rye, barley, oats, and spelt) that has not been completely cooked within 18 minutes after coming into contact with water. The removal of *chametz* commemorates the fact that the Jews left Egypt in a



Figure 48: Seder Plate

hurry and did not have time to let their bread rise. It is also a symbolic way of removing the “puffiness” (arrogance, pride) from people’s souls. Jews are not only prohibited from eating *chametz* during Passover, but they may not own

or derive any sort of benefit from it either, including using it to feed pets. This important stipulation requires Jews to sell all remaining leavened products before Passover begins, including utensils used to cook *chametz*. The grain product eaten during Passover in place of *chametz* is called *matzah*. *Matzah* is unleavened bread made simply from flour and water and cooked very quickly. This is traditionally viewed as the bread that the Jews made for their flight from Egypt.

On the first night of Passover (first two nights outside of Israel), Jews are commanded to have a special family meal filled with ritual to remind them of the significance of the holiday. This meal is called the *Seder*, which means “order” in Hebrew because there is a specific set of tasks that must be completed and information that must be covered in a specific order throughout the meal. To correctly follow the process, the text of the Passover meal is written in a book called the *Haggadah*.

Other Special Days

- ***Shavuot (Season of the Giving of the Torah)***: This holiday commemorates the receiving of the *Torah* from God at Mount Sinai.
- ***Tisha B'Av***: On this day, Jews remember the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, as well as other tragedies which have befallen the Jewish people. Observant Jews will fast on this day.

Notes