

# About the Hebrew Calendar and the Holidays we Celebrate

*Why are Jewish holidays always changing dates?*

Jewish holidays are on the same date every year but on the Hebrew calendar, not the Gregorian calendar that most of us use. Because the Hebrew calendar is a lunar calendar that has been adjusted to reflect some elements of the solar calendar it means that the length of the year (and dates) do not line up with the Gregorian calendar, which is purely solar. Hard copy Jewish calendars listing all of the Jewish holidays abound with both the “regular” Gregorian dates and the Hebrew dates; you can even download it right onto your electronic devices at [HebCal.com](http://HebCal.com).

*Why is the first night of the holiday before the first day?*

On the Hebrew calendar, the new day starts at sundown – so Jewish holidays begin at sundown. People often refer to the first day of a holiday using the Gregorian day and use the word “*erev*” (meaning the eve of) to refer to the first night – i.e., the night before – when the holiday begins. The first day of Passover might be a Tuesday, but the holiday would start on the Monday night before – Erev Passover – which is when the first seder would be held. **The dates we list indicate the first evening of the holiday.**

*Pronunciation, greetings, and rituals:*

Most of the Jewish holidays on this list have been celebrated for centuries – in different Jewish cultures, languages, and places – so there is rarely one “right” way to say or do anything. There can even be different ways that people pronounce the name of a holiday or greet people during a holiday. The explanations below address some of that, but there is much more to explore all of these holidays!

# Shabbat

**Hebrew name means:** Sabbath, Day of Rest (the English word came from the Hebrew.)

**What's it about?** A day of rest at the end of every week that is intended to provide space and time without work in which the observer can find meaning and joy. It is the only holy day that originates with God's celebration of it and the commandment regarding the Sabbath is the fourth of the ten commandments, "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy."

**Pronounce it:** Sha-baht. You might also hear Shabbas or Shabbos.

**When is it:** Once a week! Shabbat lasts 25 hours – from just before sundown on Friday until an hour after sundown on Saturday evening.

**Jewish Holiday Foods:** Food you and your family love and some challah. If you are having Shabbat for the first time, the rule is: *yummy*. Make enough food in advance so that you don't have to work cooking lunch on Saturday!

**Activities:** Shabbat begins with the lighting of candles and if you're having a Shabbat dinner, blessings over wine and bread, to mark the separation of time from the week that is coming to an end. People celebrate Shabbat in lots of different ways. Some people don't spend money, some turn off their phone over dinner, others go to synagogue services, and some observe strict rules regarding studying Torah, not using technology, or even tearing paper towels and toilet paper.

However, you observe, Shabbat is a great day to hang out with family and friends, eat a lot, take walks, study Torah, sing songs, read stories to children, take a nap and just chill out. The end of Shabbat is traditionally marked by a ritual called *Havdalah* during which songs are sung and blessings are said over wine/grape juice, spices, and light (a special twisted candle is used), separating Shabbat from the rest of the week.

**Symbols of Jewish holiday:** Candles, challah, wine

**Shabbat Greeting?** *Shabbat Shalom*, which is Hebrew for peaceful sabbath. Or *Gut Shabbos* (pronounced goot shabiss), which is Yiddish for good Shabbat.

# The Jewish High Holy Days (High Holidays)

The High Holy Days encompass Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (see below). While the holidays themselves are only two or three days total (some people observe Rosh Hashanah for two days and some people observe it for one day), the ritual and engagement of the High Holiday period begins a month before Rosh Hashanah and includes the 10-day period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

## Rosh Hashanah (High Holiday)

**Hebrew name means:** Head of the year—idiomatically, New Year.

**What's It About?** It's both the celebration of the Creation of the world and the new year as well as the Day of Judgement. This holiday lasts seven days.

**Pronounce it:** Rosh ha-shah-nah.

**Rosh Hashanah Foods:** Apples and honey, round challah with raisins, honey cake, pomegranates, pumpkins and other round foods, sweet foods, and foods that are gold-colored, like carrots.

**Activities:** Many Jews who don't go to the synagogue the rest of the year go for the marathon of synagogue services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. One special activity that people don't want to miss is the sounding of the *shofar*, or ram's horn. Traditionally, people eat apples dipped in honey, to signify a sweet new year, and many people send new years' cards.

The most important activity associated with this holiday time comes between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: trying to repair relationships and make apologies for bad behavior in the previous year.

**Symbols of Holiday:** The shofar or ram's horn, apples, and honey, pomegranates, the Book of Life.

**Rosh Hashanah Greeting:** Happy New Year or *Shanah Tovah*. If you want to give a more complete version of the greeting, try *L'shanah tovah tikatevu*, may you be inscribed for a good year (in the Book of Life). Yiddish-speaking Jews may say "*a gut yor*," "a good year" or "*Gut yontif*" meaning "a good holiday."

# Yom Kippur (High Holiday)

**Hebrew name means:** Day of Atonement

**What's It About?** A fast day that is traditionally filled with prayer and collective confession and atonement. It is said that "on Rosh Hashanah the Book of Life is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed."

**Pronounce it:** Yohm kee-poor or yohm kipper.

**Jewish Holiday Foods:** None. It's a fast day! Children under age 13, people who are pregnant and those whose health might be harmed don't fast.

**Activities:** In addition to not eating, traditionally you would also not drink, not wash, not wear leather, nor have sexual relations. Many people go to synagogue for most of the day, and even those who are not observant may go for a special service called Yizkor, that honors the dead. The fast (and holiday) ends with a festive break-fast meal after sundown.

**Symbols of Holiday:** Shofar, people usually wear white clothing (symbolizing purity)

**Greeting?** "Have an easy fast" or "*Tsom Kal*." Some say *Shanah Tovah*, which is Hebrew for "Happy New Year" or *Gamar hatimah tovah*, "a good completion to your inscription in the Book of Life."

# Sukkot

**Hebrew name means:** Booths or tabernacles

**What's it about?** In ancient times when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, this was a pilgrimage holiday to celebrate the harvest. Rabbinic tradition now holds that this week-long holiday is when we remember the experience of the Israelites' years of wandering in the desert.

**Pronounce it:** Sue-coat or sukkiss

**Jewish Holiday Foods:** No specific food, but fruit and vegetables are part of the harvest theme.

**Activities:** Families and communities build a sukkah (or hut) in the yard that will be used for the whole week of Sukkot for eating and entertaining. Some people even sleep in their sukkah. These huts remind us of the ones our ancestors dwelled in while wandering in the desert. The sukkah should have 3 sides and a roof, but still be open to the elements. There are also rituals that invite our ancestors to join us and to celebrate the bounty of the Holy Land.

**Symbols of Holiday:** The sukkah, the lulav (a palm frond) and the etrog (a kind of citrus) that are used in the ritual to celebrate bounty.

**Greeting?** *Hag Sameah* or *Gut Yonif* (Happy holiday, in Hebrew and Yiddish, respectively) is the proper greeting for the first and last days of holiday, whereas the proper greeting for the intermediate days is *Moadim l'simcha*, which means "festivals for joy."

# Simchat Torah

**Hebrew name means:** Rejoicing in the Torah.

**What's it about?** It celebrates the end of reading of the year's Torah cycle and starting it anew for the new year.

**Pronounce it:** The ch in Simchat is guttural.

**Jewish Holiday Foods:** No specific food.

**Activities:** Simchat Torah is marked with synagogue services. On this holiday, we finish the annual cycle of Torah reading, and read the very last words of the Torah. As soon as we finish the Torah, we start reading it over from the beginning. The service is punctuated by the congregation dancing with the Torah scrolls.

**Symbols of Holiday:** The Torah scroll, flags that children carry, dancing

**Greeting?** *Hag sameah* or *Gut Yontif* (Happy holiday in Hebrew and Yiddish, respectively.)

# Hanukkah

**Hebrew name means:** Dedication

**What's it about?** Hanukkah is an 8-day holiday that commemorates the Jewish recapture and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 164 BCE.

**Pronounce it:** It's the spelling on this one that will throw you – Chanukah, Chanukkah, Hanukkah, Hanuka – they're all right – it's a transliteration of the Hebrew, so you can't spell it wrong!

**Jewish Holiday Foods:** Fried foods, especially potato pancakes, called *latkes*, and jelly doughnuts called *sufganiyot*. We eat foods fried in oil to remind us of the small amount of oil (just enough for one day) that miraculously burned for eight days when the Jews rededicated the Temple.

**Activities:** The main observance is lighting the candles in a ceremonial lamp called a Hanukkiah, or Hanukkah menorah, each night for 8 nights. Playing with a top called a dreidel is another fun tradition. Hanukkah is a "minor festival" in the sense that there is no requirement to abstain from work.

**Symbols of Jewish holiday:** Menorah, candles, dreidel.

**Hanukkah Greeting:** *Hanukkah Samech* (Happy Hanukkah!) or *Chag Urim Sameach* (Happy festival of lights!)

# Tu Bishvat, The New Year for Trees

**Hebrew name means:** 15th day of Hebrew month of Shvat (yes, the name of the holiday is simply the date.)

**What's it about?** When the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing, Jews offered the first fruits of their trees on Tu Bishvat. You could call it the birthday of the trees and it is now thought of as an environmental holiday.

**Pronounce it:** Too beesh'vat

**Jewish Holiday Foods:** Fruit, nuts and other things that grow on or in trees, including the seven species mentioned in the Torah: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates.

**Activities:** Many Jews have reclaimed the mystical practice of the Tu Bishvat seder, or ritual meal as an opportunity to explore environmental themes in Judaism. Another practice is to plant trees. This is a minor festival in that there is no obligation not to work.

**Symbols of holiday:** Trees and tree fruit

**Greeting?** *Hag Sameah* (Happy holiday)



# Purim

**Hebrew name means:** “Lots” – it refers to the Book of Esther in which the villain Haman draws lots to set the date for the Jews’ destruction.

**What’s it about?** Celebration of the narrow escape from genocide of the Jews described in the biblical Book of Esther.

**Pronounce it:** Poor-im

**Jewish Holiday Foods:** Triangular pastries called hamantashen (Haman’s pockets), named for the bad guy in the Book of Esther. Some people also eat other foods with things hidden inside, like dumplings. Drinking alcohol is, for many people, a part of their Purim tradition.

**Activities:** On Purim we read the Book of Esther and use noisemakers (called *graggers*) to drown out the name of the evil Haman, who wanted to kill all of the Jews kids and many adults get dressed up in costumes and eat triangular cookies and other treats. It’s also traditional to give money to charity, send anonymous packages of goodies to your friends (called *mishloach manot*) and to drink to excess. Purim is a “minor festival” in that there is no traditional obligation not to work.

**Symbols of Jewish Holiday:** Masks, costumes, noisemakers called groggers, hamantashen.

**Purim Greeting?** Happy Purim! You can say “*Purim Sameah*,” which means “happy Purim.”

# Passover (Pesach)

**Hebrew name means:** “Pass over”

**What’s it about?** This 8-day holiday (though some celebrate 7 days) celebrates God freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The name refers to God “passing over” the houses of the Israelites during the 10<sup>th</sup> plague, (the killing of the first born.)

**Pronounce it:** (In Hebrew) Pey-sach

**Jewish Holiday Foods:** Traditionally, Jews eat no bread or leavened food on Passover, and instead eat matzah, which is unleavened bread. There are many traditional foods that are eaten on Passover, including matzah balls, gefilte fish and macaroons. Additionally, there are many symbolic foods that appear on the seder plate that are explained during the seder.

**Activities:** Spring cleaning and seders. Seders are heavily ritualized holiday meals in which we are commanded to tell the story of Passover every year. Passover is the most celebrated Jewish holiday in the world and different Jewish cultures have different food and rituals – all delicious, all beautiful.

**Symbols of Jewish Holiday:** Matzah, lamb, eggs, horseradish root.

**Passover Greeting?** “Happy Pesach” or “Happy Passover.” Some people say “Hag kasher v’sameach”—have a happy and kosher holiday.

# Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day

**Hebrew name means:** Holocaust Day.

**What's it about?** Europeans commemorate the Holocaust on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Jan. 27, 1945. The Israeli government, however, wanted a date that would honor Jewish resistance to the Nazi genocide of World War II. After some debate, it was decided that Yom HaShoah would be observed on the 27<sup>th</sup> of the Hebrew month of Nisan, since it was during the period of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, an act of Jewish heroism and resistance. In the United States, Yom Ha-Shoah is observed on the 27<sup>th</sup> of Nisan.

**Pronounce it:** Yohm ha-show-ah

**Jewish Holiday Foods:** This is a new holiday. It's not traditional to fast, nor to eat particular foods.

**Activities:** Many communities hold commemorative events and yahrzeit (annual memorial) candles are lit.

**Symbols of holiday:** Memorial candles, yellow stars of David

**Greeting?** None.

# Yom Ha-Atzmaut, Israel Independence Day

**Hebrew name means:** Independence Day

**What's it about?** This holiday celebrates the formal founding of the modern State of Israel.

**Pronounce it:** Yohm ha-aatz-mah-oot

**Jewish Holiday Foods:** Where Jewish communities hold fairs or other big events, this is a good time to get falafel and other Israeli foods.

**Activities:** In many U.S. Jewish communities, it's the custom to have a fair or other celebration. Some religious Jews add celebratory liturgy to weekday prayers.

**Symbols of holiday:** Israeli flags, music, foods

**Greeting?** No official greeting.

# Shavuot

Hebrew name means: (Feast of) Weeks – it is celebrated seven weeks after Passover.

**What's it about?** Shavuot combines two ancient holidays: the giving of Torah at Mt. Sinai that marks the covenant between God and the Jewish people (seven weeks after the Exodus from Egypt) and the early summer grain harvest.

**Pronounce it:** Shah-voo-oat or sha-voo-os.

**Jewish Holiday Foods:** It's traditional to eat dairy foods Shavuot, so lots of blintzes, cheese and ice cream. (On "dairy holidays" people who keep kosher do not eat meat.)

**Activities:** The Book of Ruth (a story about interfaith marriage and family!) is read in synagogues and some people participate in an all-night Torah study session, called *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*.

**Symbols of holiday:** Fruit, sheaves of wheat, tablets (representing the giving of Torah)

**Greeting?** *Hag Sameah* ("happy holiday" in Hebrew), *Gut Yontif* (Yiddish for "good holiday")

# Tisha B'Av

**Hebrew name means:** Ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av

**What's it about?** This is the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. This fast day commemorates the Roman destruction of the Second Temple. In the medieval period, Jews began attaching other tragedies to the day, including the expulsion from Spain in 1492, making it a general day of mourning.

**Pronounce it:** Tisha ba-av

**Jewish Holiday Foods:** A 24-hour fast day with no food or water from sundown the first evening until sundown the following evening.

**Activities:** Though this is a major fast day with no food, water or washing, it is a minor holiday in the sense that there is no requirement to abstain from work. The main activity is hearing the chanting of the Book of Lamentations in the synagogue, during which it is traditional to sit on the floor in the dark.

**Symbols of the holiday:** No major visual symbols—some might remember it by photos of Jerusalem.

**Greeting?** An unusual feature of Tisha B'Av is that it's traditional not to greet people during the fast. This comes from Jewish mourning practices. (When one visits a house of mourning, it's not usual to greet the mourners.)