

Friedel's Family Guide to Jewish Holidays, Customs and Celebrations

This guide is designed to give a brief overview of Jewish holidays with an explanation of common customs and celebrations.

An Explanation of the Jewish Calendar

Jewish holidays actually occur on the same day every year: the same day on the Jewish calendar! The Jewish calendar has a different number of days than the secular calendar because the Jewish calendar is tied to the moon's cycles instead of the sun's. The problem with strictly lunar calendars is that there are approximately 12.4 lunar months in every solar year, so a 12-month lunar calendar loses about 11 days every year and a 13-month lunar gains about 19 days every year. The months on such a calendar "drift" relative to the solar year. To compensate for this drift, a leap-month is added every two or three years. As a result, the holidays don't always fall on the same day on the secular calendar, but they always fall within the same month or two. The Chinese calendar (which is also lunar) works the same way, which is why Chinese New Year occurs on different days but is always in late January or early February. The Muslim calendar is lunar but does not add months, which is why Ramadan circles the calendar.

How long is a Jewish holiday? It depends on who you ask! In ancient times the calendar was set according to physical observations of the phases of the moon, the blossoming of trees and other nature signs. As there could be some uncertainty about these signs, an extra day was added to some holidays in outlying districts. In modern times, some branches of Judaism have abandoned this custom, returning the holidays to the length specified in the Bible. Other branches continue the ancient tradition of adding a day to certain holidays. Thus, for some Jews, a holiday might be observed on a Thursday but not on Friday, while others might observe both Thursday and Friday.

Adding to the confusion is the fact that a Jewish "day" starts and ends at sunset. Therefore, holidays start at sunset the evening before the day listed on a secular calendar. For example, if your calendar says that Passover starts on April 24, families will be getting together for Passover dinner on the night of April 23. A few secular calendars now mark the preceding day as "Erev Passover," which basically means Passover Eve. If your calendar says "Erev" or "Eve" before a holiday name, it means the holiday starts at sundown on that day and continues into the next day.

Shabbat

Hebrew name means: Sabbath

What's it about? The day of rest and weekly observance of God's completion of creation.

Pronounce it: Shah-baht.

When is it: Once a week! Shabbat lasts from Friday evening until Saturday night. Havdalah is the weekly service that closes out Shabbat on Saturday night.

Jewish Holiday Foods: It's traditional to have wine or grape juice and two loaves of challah, a braided egg bread, at Shabbat meals. It is a priority for those who celebrate each week to plan festive meals with delicious foods and to invite guests.

Activities: The point of Shabbat is to observe a day of rest—some use a strict set of rabbinic definitions to figure out what does and doesn't count as work, and those folks don't drive, carry money, write, or watch TV on Shabbat. Others don't use these definitions, but they just take the day off. Either way, 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 generally chill out.

Greeting: "Shabbat shalom," which means peaceful sabbath.

Rosh Hashanah

Hebrew name means: Head of the Year

What's It About? As the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah is the day when the year number on the Jewish calendar increases. The holiday marks the beginning of the Jewish year and begins a ten-day period of prayer and repentance, which ends on Yom Kippur.

Pronounce it: roh-sh ha-shah-nah

When is it: Starts the evening of Monday, September 6, 2021.

Holiday Foods: Big, festive family meals! Apples and honey (for a sweet new year), round challah bread with raisins, honey cake, pomegranates, and sweet foods.

Activities: Many Jews who never show up to synagogue the rest of the year go for the synagogue services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. One special activity that they don't want to miss is the sounding of the shofar, or ram's horn. At home, a special activity is eating apples dipped in honey. Many Jews send New Year's cards for this holiday. Probably the most important activity associated with this holiday comes between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: trying to repair relationships and make apologies.

Greeting: "Happy New Year," or the Hebrew version, "Shanah Tovah" (shah-nah toe-vah).

Yom Kippur

Hebrew name means: Day of Atonement.

What's It About? Yom Kippur is a solemn day, observed with prayer, meditation, self-reflection, and fasting. Jews ask for forgiveness to start the year with a clear conscience.

Pronounce it: yohm kee-poor

When is it: Starts the evening of Wednesday, September 15, 2021.

Jewish Holiday Foods: None. It's a fast day! Well, families do have traditions about what to eat when the fast is over, like a dairy meal, but there's nothing universal. Children under age 13 and people whose health might be harmed don't fast.

Activities: Mainly there are a lot of traditional prayers and things to read in the synagogue.

Greeting: You can say "Happy New Year" or "have an easy fast." Some say Shanah Tovah, which is Hebrew for Happy New Year. The more targeted greeting for Yom Kippur is "Gamar hatimah tovah"—a good completion to your inscription in the book of life.

Sukkot

Hebrew name means: Booths or tabernacles. The singular is sukkah ("booth").

What's it about? In ancient times when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, this was a pilgrimage holiday to celebrate the harvest. In our time, it still coincides with the harvest.

Pronounce it: *sue-coat*

When is it: Starts the evening of Monday, September 20, 2021.

Jewish Holiday Foods: No specific special food, just more big, sumptuous meals.

Activities: Before the holiday, communities and some individual families build a sukkah or hut in their yard. The sukkah is open to the elements. During the holiday, an important activity is eating in the sukkah. There is also a ritual involving blessing and waving the etrog—a citron—and the lulav—a palm branch bound with myrtle and willow.

Symbols of Holiday: The sukkah, the lulav and the etrog.

Greeting: "Hag Sameach" (meaning: Happy holiday; pronounced: hag sa-may-ah) with a heavy guttural h at the beginning of the first word and the end of the second.

Shemini Atzeret

Literally the "8th day of assembly," this holiday marks the end of Sukkot with an annual prayer for rain. (see Sukkot, above)

Simchat Torah

Hebrew name means: Rejoicing in the Torah.

What's it about? At the end of Sukkot, there is one more holiday to celebrate finishing the reading of the Torah scroll for the year and starting it over again.

Pronounce it: sim-hat toe-rah (The ch in Simchat is one of those heavy guttural ones.)

When is it: Some celebrate Shemini Atzeret (Eighth Day of Assembly) and Simchat Torah on two days, and some on one day. Starts the evening Monday, September 27, 2021.

Jewish Holiday Foods: No specific special food, just more big, delicious meals.

Activities: This is a synagogue holiday centered around singing and dancing with the Torah scrolls as we complete the cyclical reading for the year and start again.

Greeting: “Hag Sameach” (meaning: Happy holiday; pronounced: hag sa-may-ahh) with a heavy guttural h at the beginning of the first word and the end of the second.

Hanukah

Hebrew name means: Dedication.

What’s it about? Hanukah is an 8-day holiday that commemorates the Jewish recapture and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Pronounce it: Haa-noo-ka

When is it: Starts the evening of Sunday, November 28, 2021.

Jewish Holiday Foods: Fried foods, especially potato pancakes, called latkes, and jelly doughnuts called sufganiyot.

Activities: The main observance is lighting the candles in a ceremonial lamp called a hanukkiah or Hanukah menorah. Playing with a top called a dreidel is another fun tradition. Hanukah is a minor holiday.

Greeting: “Happy Hanukah!”

WAIT! Why are there so many spellings of the holiday name?

Hanukah, Hannukkah, Hanuka, Chanukah, Channukah....Because the name is the English transliteration of the Hebrew, we see a number of different spellings out there. All are acceptable. This is true of all Jewish holidays with names that are transliterated from the Hebrew, but Hanukah seems to have more spelling options out there than other holidays.

Tu B’Shevat

Hebrew name means: 15th day of Hebrew month of Shevat; The new year for the trees

What’s it about? When the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing, Jews offered the first fruits of their trees on the Shavuot holiday (see Shavuot, below). The trees had to be at least four years old, and Tu B’Shevat was used for figuring out the age of the trees. You could call it the official tree birthday. The day is now celebrated with activities that connect to the environment and nature.

Pronounce it: too beesh’vat

When is it: January 17, 2022

Jewish Holiday Foods: Fruit, nuts and other things that grow on or in trees

Activities: A Tu B’Shevat seder, or ritual meal, is a great opportunity to explore environmentalist themes in Judaism. Another practice is to plant trees. This is a minor holiday.

Symbols of holiday: Trees and tree fruit

Greeting: There is no official greeting for this holiday.

Purim

Hebrew name means: Lots. Refers to Esther 3:7, in which the villain Haman draws lots to set the date for the Jews' destruction.

What's it about? Celebration of a narrow escape from genocide described in the biblical Book of Esther.

Pronounce it: Poor-im.

When is it: Starts the evening of Wednesday, March 16, 2022.

Jewish Holiday Foods: Triangular pastries called hamantashen (Haman's pockets) or oznei Haman (Haman's ear), named for the bad guy in the Book of Esther.

Activities: On Purim we read the Book of Esther, wear costumes, eat triangular cookies and other treats, and use noisemakers. It's also traditional to give money to charity and give packages of goodies to your friends (called mishloach manot).

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

Greeting: Happy Purim! You can say "Purim Sameah," which means "happy Purim."

Pesach

Hebrew name means: Passover. The names—Pesach and Passover—are used interchangeably. It refers to Exodus 12:23, when God passed over the Israelites.

What's it about? Passover celebrates God liberating the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. The holiday is observed either seven or eight days.

Pronounce it: Pay-sakh (with a guttural h sound, if you can)

When is it: Starts the evening of Friday, April 15, 2022.

Jewish Holiday Foods: Traditionally, Jews eat no bread or leavened food on Passover, and do eat matzah, an unleavened bread. There are many food traditions that spring from this, including all the many foods made of ground matzah (called "matzah meal"). These include things like matzah balls, gefilte fish, and sponge cake.

Activities: The big holiday meal is called a seder, at which we retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. This is a major holiday, meaning that traditional Jews take days off of work at the beginning and end of the eight days of the holiday, but work in the middle. Friedel takes our spring break each year during the week of the Passover holiday.

Symbols of Jewish Holiday: Matzah, lambs (because of the historical Passover sacrifice), eggs, horseradish root, salt water.

Greeting: "Happy Passover"

Yom HaShoah

Hebrew name means: Holocaust day.

What's it about? Yom HaShoah is the official Memorial Day set by the Israeli government. Europeans commemorate the Holocaust on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Jan. 27, 1945, but the Israeli government wanted a date that would honor Jewish resistance to the Nazi genocide of World War II. After some debate, the Jewish

community as a whole agreed on the 27 of the Hebrew month Nisan, since it was during the period of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, an act of Jewish heroism and resistance.

Pronounce it: Yohm ha-show-ah.

When is it: April 28, 2022.

Jewish Holiday Foods: None.

Activities: In most Jewish communities, there are commemorative events.

Greeting: None.

Yom HaZikaron (Israeli Memorial Day)

Hebrew name means: Remembrance Day

What's it about? Israel's Memorial Day for her fallen soldiers and victims of terrorism

Pronounce it: Yohm ha-zee-kah-rone

When is it: The holiday always falls the day before Yom HaAtzmaut (see below).

Activities: Commemoration services are held. In Israel, a siren is sounded, and the entire country comes to a halt for two minutes to remember and pay tribute.

Greeting: None.

Yom HaAtzmaut

Hebrew name means: Independence Day.

What's it about? This holiday celebrates the independence of the modern State of Israel.

The modern State of Israel formally declared independence from Great Britain on May 14, 1948.

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

When is it: May 4, 2022

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.

Symbols of holiday: Israeli flags, music, foods.

Greeting: None.

Shavuot

Hebrew name means: Weeks, because it is traditional to count the days/weeks between Passover and Shavuot.

What's it about? Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. It was a pilgrimage holiday when the Temple was standing in Jerusalem, when farmers brought the first fruits of their four-year-old trees. It's a one-day holiday in the land of Israel, though Orthodox and Conservative Jews outside of Israel keep it for two days. Lag B'Omer is a minor holiday that falls between Passover and Shavuot, on the 33rd day of the counting of the time period between the two holidays.

Pronounce it: Shah-voo-oat.

When is it: Starts the evening of Saturday, June 4, 2022.

Jewish Holiday Foods: Dairy foods are traditional on Shavuot.

Activities: One of the traditional texts for Shavuot is the book of Ruth. Reform Judaism therefore chose Shavuot as the holiday on which to hold Confirmation ceremonies, when teenagers reaffirm their Jewish beliefs. Some Jews follow the mystical custom of an all-night study session, called a Tikkun Leil Shavuot, on the eve of Shavuot.

Greeting: Hag Sameach (meaning: Happy holiday; pronounced: hag sa-may-ah) with a heavy guttural h at the beginning of the first word and the end of the second.

A note about other holidays:

Several holidays that are often thought of as being secular in American culture have their roots in religious practices. Some Jewish families do not observe or participate in celebrations for Halloween, Valentine's Day or St. Patrick's Day, while many Jewish families do participate in those celebrations. As a result, if these holidays fall on a weekday, Friedel does not include special activities related to the holiday as part of the school day.