

A Basic Guide to Jewish Festivals

Rosh Hashanah

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

What's It About? A solemn holiday beginning the calendar year with repentance from sin and the hope of renewal.

Pronounce it: rosh ha-sha-nah.

When is it: Starts the evening of September 24, 2014; September 13, 2015; October 2, 2016.

Foods: Apples and honey, round challah with raisins, honey cake, pomegranates.

Activities: Many Jews who never show up to synagogue the rest of the year go for the marathon of 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 for bad behaviour in the previous year.

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

Greeting? You can say Happy New Year, or try the Hebrew version, 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 say "Gut yontov."

Read more: *High Holidays Resource Page* at www.interfaithfamily.com - includes a Guide to the High Holidays for Interfaith Families, booklets, blessings, articles and more.

Yom Kippur

Hebrew name means: Day of Atonement.

What's It About? A fast day of prayer and collective confession.

Pronounce it: yom kee-poor.

When is it: Starts the evening of October 3, 2014; September 22, 2015; October 11, 2016.

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 other people whose health might be harmed don't fast.

Activities: In addition to all the negatives involved in fasting - not eating, not drinking, not washing, not wearing leather, not having sexual relations - there are a lot of things to do on Yom Kippur. Mainly there are a lot of traditional prayers and things to read in the synagogue. For a lot of Jews who aren't very observant, Yom Kippur is special because it's the day they go to memorial services, called Yizkor, to honour dead relatives.

Symbols of Holiday: White clothing, trainers worn with dress clothes (because of the prohibition on leather).

Greeting? You can say Happy New Year or "fast well." Some say *Shanah Tovah*, which is Hebrew for Happy New Year. The more targeted greeting for Yom Kippur is *Gamar Chatimah Tovah* - a good completion to your inscription in the book of life.

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Sukkot

Hebrew name means: Booths or tabernacles. The singular is sukkah.

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-kot

When is it: Starts the evening of October 8, 2014; September 27, 2015; October 16, 2016.

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 garden. 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? Chag Sameach (Happy holiday) with a guttural ch at the beginning of the first word and the end of the second.

Read more: *Sukkot and Simchat Torah Resource Page* at www.interfaithfamily.com - includes videos, booklets, blessings, articles and more.

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: The ch in Simchat is one of those guttural ones.

When is it: Orthodox Jews celebrate Shemini Atzeret (Eighth Day of Assembly) and Simchat Torah on two days, and progressive Jews on one day.

Starts the evening of October 15, 2014 (October 16 if Shemini Atzeret is observed); October 4, 2015 (October 5 if Shemini Atzeret is observed); October 23, 2016 (October 24 if Shemini Atzeret is observed).

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

Activities: This is a synagogue holiday with another really long service, but in the middle of it, people get up, process through their building with the scrolls and then dance with them. The more traditional they are, the crazier they get with the dancing. It's also a chance to honour a lot of people by calling them up to make blessings on the Torah, because there is a reading from the end of the scroll—the death of Moses—and another from the beginning—the creation of the world. In some congregations the assembled people unroll the Torah scroll and stand in the middle of the parchment before they start the cycle again.

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

Greeting? Chag sameach (Happy holiday) with a guttural ch at the beginning of the first word and the end of the second.

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Chanukah

Hebrew name means: Dedication. (Americans spell it “Hanukkah”)

What's it about? Chanukah is an 8-day holiday that commemorates the Jewish recapture and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 164 BCE. See the book of Maccabees in the bible.

Pronounce it: The word Chanukah begins with a guttural ch, like the j in José - Chan-oo-kah.

When is it: Starts the evening of December 16, 2014; December 6, 2015, December 24, 2016.

Foods: Fried foods, especially potato pancakes, called latkes, and doughnuts (*sufganiyot* in Hebrew).

Activities: The main observance is lighting the candles in a ceremonial lamp called a Chanukiah. Playing with a top called a dreidel (*sevivon* in Hebrew) is another fun tradition. Chanukah is a minor holiday in the sense that there is no requirement to abstain from work.

Symbols of the holiday: Chanukiah (9 branch candlestick, candles, dreidel).

Greeting: Happy Chanukah!

Read more: *December Holidays Resource Page* at www.interfaithfamily.com - includes a Guide to Chanukah for Interfaith Families, videos, a booklet, recipes, activities for children and more.

Tu Bishvat, The New Year for Trees

Hebrew name means: 15th day of Hebrew month of Shvat

What's it about? When the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing, Jews offered the first fruits of their trees on the Shavuot holiday. The trees had to be at least four years old, and this date was for figuring out the age of the trees. You could call it the official tree birthday. These days it's a great time to think about trees and the environment.

Pronounce it: too bish'vat

When is it: February 4, 2015; January 25, 2016; February 11, 2017.

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

Activities: Many ordinary Jews have reclaimed the mystical practice of the Tu Bishvat Seder, or ritual meal - a great opportunity to explore environmentalist themes in Judaism. Another practice is to plant trees. This is a minor holiday in that there is no traditional obligation not to work.

Symbols of holiday: Trees and tree fruit

Greeting? There is no official greeting for this holiday. Chag Sameach (Happy holiday) with a guttural ch at the beginning of the first word and the end of the second.

Read more: *Tu Bishvat Resource Page* at www.interfaithfamily.com - includes a booklet, seder suggestions, videos and more.

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 March 15, 2014; March 4, 2015; March 23, 2016.

Foods: Triangular pastries called hamantashen (Haman's pockets), named for the bad guy in the Book of Esther. Some Jews also eat other foods with things hidden inside, like dumplings, other sweets and goodies, and alcohol.

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, send packages of goodies to your friends (called mishloach manot) and to get drunk. This is a minor holiday in that there is no traditional obligation not to work.

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

Greeting? Happy Purim! You can say "Purim Sameach," which means "happy Purim."

Read more: *Purim Resource Page* at www.interfaithfamily.com - includes videos, activities for children, booklets and more.

Pesach or Passover

Hebrew name means: Pesach means Passover. 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 and is probably the single most theologically important holiday in the Jewish calendar. (No pressure.) The holiday lasts seven days in Israel and in progressive communities, whereas Orthodox communities keep it for eight days.

Pronounce it: If you can't say the guttural ch sound represented by the ch in Pey-sach, say Passover.

When is it: Starts the evening of April 14, 2014; April 3, 2015; and April 22, 2016.

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. Cookies and cakes made out of nuts, like macaroons, are also big on Passover, as are sweets that follow the special rules of keeping kosher for this holiday.

Activities: Observant Jews don't eat bread or other leavened foods and have big holiday meal called a seder where they 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 holiday, but work in the middle.

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

Greeting? It's fine to say "Happy Pesach" or "Happy Passover."

Read more: *Passover and Easter Resource Page* at www.interfaithfamily.com - includes a Guide to Passover for Interfaith Families, recipes, videos, articles, a booklet and more.

Yom Ha-Shoah — Holocaust Memorial Day

Hebrew name means: Day of catastrophe, usually translated as Holocaust Memorial Day

What's it about? Europeans commemorate the Holocaust on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Jan. 27, 1945, but the Israeli government wanted a date that would honour 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, but still falls after Passover.

Pronounce it: Yom ha-show-ah.

When is it: April 16, 2015; May 5, 2016.

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

Activities: Because this is a new holiday, there are no traditional activities. In many Jewish communities, there are commemorative events. Some light special yahrzeit (annual memorial) candles.

Symbols of holiday: Memorial candles, yellow stars of David, images of the Holocaust.

Greeting? None.

Read more: Yom Ha-Shoah at www.myjewishlearning.com - a non-denominational Jewish website.

Yom Ha-Atzmaut — Israel Independence Day

Hebrew name means: Independence day.

What's it about? The modern State of Israel formally declared independence from Great Britain on May 14, 1948. In order to make this political milestone into a religious holiday, Jews decided to tie

the holiday to the Hebrew date, Iyar 5. Jews outside the Land of Israel also celebrate this as a holiday.

Pronounce it: Yom ha-atz-mah-oot.

When is it: April 23, 2015; May 12, 2016.

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 UK 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, but some might like to hear "happy Israel Independence Day."

Read more: The Israeli government webpage at

www.knesset.gov.il/holidays/eng/independence_day.htm

Shavuot

Hebrew name means: Weeks, because it was traditional to count the 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 in the Diaspora keep it for two days.

Pronounce it: Shah-voo-oat. Some Jews also say Shah-voo-iss.

When is it: Starts the evening of May 23, 2015; June 11, 2016.

Foods: Dairy foods are traditional on Shavuot, some say because the Jews learned that all their meat was not kosher when they received the Torah! One important traditional food is blintzes.

Activities: One of the traditional texts for Shavuot is the book of Ruth. Most Jewish communities in the UK follow the custom of an all-night study session, called a Tikkun Leyl Shavuot, on the eve of Shavuot.

Symbols of holiday: The Ten Commandment tablets, blintzes.

Greeting? Chag Sameach (Happy holiday) with a guttural ch at the beginning of the first word and the end of the second.

Read more: *Shavuot Resource Page* at www.interfaithfamily.com - includes booklets, recipes, articles and more.

Tisha B'Av

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

What's it about? This fast day commemorates the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. In the medieval period, Jews began attaching other calamities to the day, including the expulsion from Spain in 1492, making it an all-purpose day of mourning.

Pronounce it: Tisha be-av.

When is it: Starts the evening of August 4, 2014; July 25, 2015; August 13, 2016.

Foods: A fast day with no food or water.

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 the chanting of the book of Lamentations in the synagogue, during which it's traditional to sit on the floor in the dark. Medieval Jews wrote long dirges for the holiday that are also part of the services for this holiday in some synagogues.

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

Greeting? An odd 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 people either. It's OK if you slip up and say hello by accident in either case - you'd be surprised how polite people are.

Read more: A personal take on Tisha B'Av: Fast for the Body, Food for the Spirit by Marinell James, at www.interfaithfamily.com

Shabbat

Hebrew name means: Sabbath—though the English word actually came from Shabbat!

What's it about? A day of rest and enjoyment at the end of every week that religious people undertake in imitation of God, who rested on the seventh day of creation.

Pronounce it: Sha-bat.

When is it: Once a week! Shabbat lasts from 18 minutes before sundown on Friday until an hour after sundown on Saturday evening.

Foods: Religious Jews try to eat especially delicious food on Shabbat, so if you are having Shabbat for the first time, the rule is *yummy*. It's traditional to have two loaves of special bread— the bread is challah, a braided egg bread. It's also an old custom to make stew called hamin or cholent (with a normal English ch, not a guttural ch sound) that is cooked overnight so that one can have hot food for Saturday lunch without having to do the work of cooking.

Activities: Shabbat begins with the lighting of candles. There are special synagogue services and blessings to say at meals. The point of Shabbat is not to work. 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. Whether one is a strict constructionist or a loose constructionist, 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.

Symbols of the holiday: Candles, challah, wine, flowers.

Greeting? Shabbat shalom, which means peaceful sabbath. Yiddish speakers say *Gut Shabbos*.

Read more: *Shabbat and Havdalah Resource Page* at www.interfaithfamily.com - includes booklets, a Guide to Shabbat and Havdalah for Interfaith Families, blessings and more.