

Jewish Holidays

Jewish holidays are “holy days” with religious importance. Many are great celebrations with special foods and traditions, but they are not simply vacation days. All Jewish holidays begin at sunset *before* the date they are listed on most calendars. This is because a Jewish “day” begins and ends at sunset, rather than at midnight. The dates of Jewish holidays are different each year. This is because a year in the Jewish calendar does not have 365 days like the secular, or non-religious, calendar. But, Jewish holidays always fall in the same season.

There is a wide variety of religious practice among Jews and Jews celebrate holidays in different ways. This worksheet does not list all Jewish holidays, only eight of the most important ones. These include: the Sabbath, which is a weekly day of rest; the two High Holy Days (Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur); the three pilgrimage festivals when the ancestors of the Jews used to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem (Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot); and two of the minor holidays (Chanukah and Purim).

There are a many ways to spell the names of Jewish holidays because their names were originally written in Hebrew, not English. There is a pronunciation guide next to the name of each holiday in the descriptions below. To use the pronunciation guide just sound out the word in the parentheses. The part in bold is the part of the word that is stressed. For example, the pronunciation guide for *computer* would be *kuhm-**pyoo**-ter*.

Shabbat (shah-baht), the Jewish **Sabbath**, is observed from sundown on Friday until nightfall on Saturday each week. It is a day of rest when Jews are supposed to focus on things other than work and material concerns. The holiday begins with a prayer over lighting candles. The candles are often held in two beautiful candlesticks. Then prayers are said over wine and a special braided bread, called *challah* (**khah**-lah, the *ch* is pronounced like *Lo**ch*** Ness Monster or *Ba**ch***). After these prayers, families eat a special meal and some sing traditional songs. Shabbat is the most frequently mentioned holiday in the Hebrew Bible and many Jews see it as the most important holiday. In part, this is because of the importance of celebrating a day of rest every week. This idea of a weekly day of rest is an important Jewish contribution to the world and is one of the origins of our modern weekends.

Rosh Hashanah (rohsh hah-**shah**-nah) is the Jewish **New Year**. It usually occurs in September or October. During the prayer service, a ram’s horn is blown to symbolically “wake-up” the congregation to think about how they can lead better lives. It is customary to eat apples and honey on these days as a symbol of a wish for a sweet new year. Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance which end on Yom Kippur. During this time, Jews reflect on their actions during the past year, seek forgiveness from those they may have upset, and think about how they can improve in the year to come.

Yom Kippur (yohm ki-poor), the **Day of Atonement**, is the most solemn holiday in the Jewish calendar. It is devoted to fasting and prayer and marks the end of the Ten Days of Repentance when Jews ask for forgiveness from other people and from God. A ram's horn is blown to mark the end of the fast which lasts from sundown to nightfall the following day.

Sukkot (soo-koht) is the weeklong fall harvest festival that commemorates the Jews' journey to freedom in the Land of Israel after living in slavery in Egypt. During this migration, Jews lived in tents rather than houses because they were traveling. To commemorate this, Jews build a temporary structure (*sukkah*) in which they eat and, if possible, sleep. These structures are often decorated with fruits and vegetables and covered with leaves and vines. Sukkot begins 15 days after Rosh HaShanah.

Chanukah (khah-noo-kah, the *ch* is pronounced like *Loch* Ness Monster or *Bach*; *Hanukah* is acceptable if you can't make the sound), the **Festival of Lights**, occurs in December. It commemorates the survival of Judaism after an emperor outlawed Jewish practices and tried to force Jews to worship idols. It is observed in Jewish homes by lighting candles in a special candleholder called a *menorah* for eight nights, beginning with one candle and adding a candle each night. According to Jewish tradition, this represents a miracle that happened when Jews rededicated their Temple in Jerusalem. Even though there was only enough lamp oil in the temple for one day, the oil lasted for eight days. In America, giving gifts at this time is common.

Purim (poo-reem) remembers the foiling of a plot to kill the Jews in ancient Persia. It is a celebration that usually occurs in March. The biblical Book of Esther which recounts the story is read aloud in the synagogue. People come dressed in masks and costumes. They cheer the heroes and boo the villains during the reading. A special triangular cookie with fruit filling is often eaten during this holiday and friends exchange gift baskets. Giving money to the poor, which is important throughout the year, is especially important at this time.

Passover is the **Festival of Freedom** that celebrates the deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. In Hebrew it is called *Pesach* (**pay**-sahkh, the *ch* is pronounced like *Loch* Ness Monster or *Bach*);, but many American Jews call it Passover. This weeklong holiday usually occurs in March or April. Families join together in an elaborate ritual meal and use a special religious text to retell the struggle of the Jewish people to gain their freedom and to celebrate the cause of freedom for all. According to tradition, when the Jews fled Egypt there was not time for the bread they were preparing to rise, so they took the unleavened bread in their escape. Jews therefore eat unleavened cracker-like bread called *matzah* instead of normal bread during the week of Passover.

Shavuot (shah-voo-oht) commemorates the giving of Jewish law. According to tradition, God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses at Mount Sinai on this day. This holiday usually occurs in June. Young children are often given small replicas of the Torah scroll, the most sacred Jewish text, to symbolize the beginning of their journey of learning about their religion. Many Jews also celebrate this holiday by staying awake all night to study.