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The Jewish Holidays

This description and five-year calendar of the Jewish Holidays is designed to aid administrators, educators, executives, and public officials when scheduling events which may be affected by Jewish religious observance. Some Jews do not attend school or engage in other secular pursuits on some or all of these days.

Sabbath

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God."

(Exodus 20:8-10)

Of all the Jewish holidays and festivals, Sabbath is the only one mentioned in the Ten Commandments. Set apart by God as a day of calm retreat and reflection, the Sabbath is considered the most important of all holy days by Jews. The Sabbath begins at Friday sunset and lasts until nightfall on Saturday. Today, Jews observe Sabbath in different ways. Orthodox Jews will not ride on the Sabbath, nor will they kindle a light. Work, the exchange of money, financial activity of any kind are forbidden. Conservative and Reform Jews, who interpret the Biblical injunctions more liberally, do not restrict their actions to the same degree. Some Jews go to synagogue or temple services on Friday evenings before supper, some after supper. Others attend services on Saturday morning. But for all Jews, the inner meaning of Sabbath is the same: it is a time for physical relaxation and spiritual renewal.

Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah, which in Hebrew means "first of the year," comes early in the fall. Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the ten-day period called the "Ten Days of Penitence," or the "Days of Awe." Yom Kippur, the "Day of Atonement," concludes this holy period.

Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) is the last day of the "Ten Days of Penitence" which, according to Jewish tradition, is a time for repentance, prayer and charity. On this solemn and important day Jewish men and women are bidden to refrain from eating and drinking, and even young children try to fast for at least a part of the day. The Bible (Leviticus 16:29-31, 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7) also requires that Jews do no manner of work on Yom Kippur. The people spend the entire day in prayer and worship.

Sukkot

Five days after the solemnity of Yom Kippur comes the most joyous of Jewish holidays, Sukkot, a festival celebrating the time when the ancient Israelites gathered in their fruit harvest and offered thanks to God for His goodness to them. In many ways it is similar to the American Thanksgiving, and some scholars believe that the Pilgrim fathers were inspired to hold their first Thanksgiving by the Sukkot festival about which they read in the Bible.

Shemini Atzeret

The eighth day of Sukkot, called Shemini Atzeret (the eighth day of assembly), is celebrated as a festival. On this day, no matter how stormy the weather outside, the congregation offers a special prayer for rain. This prayer may be traced back to ancient Israel, where Sukkot marked the end of the annual dry season and the people would pray for rain and good crops in the coming year.

Simchat Torah

On the ninth and final day of Sukkot, the year's reading of the Pentateuch is completed. This day is known as Simchat Torah, a full-fledged holiday in itself — and a most happy one — for it celebrates the end of the year's reading and the beginning of the new.

On Simchat Torah eve, a section from the closing chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy, the very last part of the Torah (the five books of Moses), is read aloud. This event is heralded by a procession in which the sacred scrolls are carried around the synagogue, while the children merrily follow with banners and songs. The next morning another procession takes place and the Scripture reading begins with the last chapter of Deuteronomy and concludes with the first chapter of Genesis.

Chanukah

In December of every year, Jews observe the festival of Chanukah. It is a joyous holiday, celebrating the first great victory for religious freedom, won by Jews, more than two thousand years ago.

In those days, the Jews of Palestine were dominated by the rule of Antiochus IV, a Syrian-Greek emperor who demanded that everyone in his empire follow his ways of worship. The Jews, however, refused to give up their faith in the One God. For three years, under the leadership of Judah Maccabee, they fought the army of Antiochus. The account of this struggle is recorded in the Books of the Maccabees. After the Jews defeated Antiochus, they cleansed and purified the Temple in Jerusalem of every pagan object that had been brought into it. It is told in Jewish legend that when Judah's men were cleaning out the Temple, they found just a single jar of holy oil — only enough to keep the Eternal Light before the Holy

Ark burning for one day. Miraculously, this one jar burned for eight days and eight nights, allowing the priests of the Temple enough time to prepare a sufficient supply of oil so that the Eternal Light could remain lit without interruption.

Judah Maccabee then proclaimed an eight-day holiday to celebrate the rededication of the Temple of God. Thus the festival received its name, for Chanukah means "dedication." Every night of the festival, candles are lit in a special candelabrum called a *menorah* — one candle the first night, two the second, and so on until eight candles are lit on the eighth night.

Purim

The story of Purim, as told in the Book of Esther, reads like a fairy tale. It takes us back some twenty-four hundred years to the land of Persia, ruled by a king named Ahasuerus, where there lived a wicked man named Haman who tried to exterminate the Jewish people.

At that time, the Queen of Persia was Esther, a Jewish lady who had been brought up by a cousin named Mordecai. Together, Esther and Mordecai were instrumental in overcoming Haman's evil plan.

On Purim eve in the synagogue, it is traditional to read the Book of Esther (in Hebrew, the Megillah). At every mention of Haman's name, the children stamp, clap and make all manner of noise with their Purim greggers (noisemakers). In this fashion, they symbolically blot out Haman's name and the memory of his evil. The next morning when the reading is concluded, the Jewish people, with prayers of thanksgiving, express their gratitude that faith proved triumphant over hatred.

Passover

To find the beginnings of the story of Passover (Pesach, in Hebrew), we must travel back thousands of years to the land of Egypt. There, the Book of Exodus tells us, the Jews were enslaved by a heartless Pharaoh. Taking pity on His people, God chose Moses to lead the Jews out of slavery. Moses implored Pharaoh to let the Jews worship God in freedom. But Pharaoh refused.

The Eternal One then sent one plague after another upon the Egyptians until they reluctantly allowed the Hebrews to leave. He then commanded the Red Sea to open so that the Hebrew slaves might escape the pursuing Egyptians and go on to a new life. Once safely encamped on dry land, the thankful Jews offered up praise to God for their deliverance. Having tasted the bitterness of slavery, they thrilled at the challenge of liberty.

So important is the emancipation story that the whole Passover ceremony is built around it. Among Orthodox and Conservative Jews, the Seder (which means "order" in Hebrew) is held on both the first and second nights of the eight-day holiday. Reform Jews, who observe a seven-day Passover, hold their one Seder on the first evening. Many synagogues now also conduct a Seder for the entire congregation.

Shavuot

Arriving just as spring is about to turn into summer (late May or early June), Shavuot (the Festival of Weeks) is a holiday of three-fold joy and pleasure. First celebrated in Biblical days as the conclusion of the grain harvest, in later years Shavuot was identified as the holiday commemorating the revelation of the Ten Commandments to Moses at Sinai. Still more recently, Shavuot has been established by Reform and Conservative Jews as the day for the holding of confirmation ceremonies.

Calendar of Jewish Holidays

	1972-73 (*5733*)	*1973-74* (*5734*)	*1974-75* (*5735*)	*1975-76* (*5736*)	*1976-77* (*5737*)
*Rosh Hashanah	Sept. 9-10	Sept. 27-28	Sept. 17-18	Sept. 6-7	Sept. 25-26
Yom Kippur	Sept. 18	Oct. 6	Sept. 26	Sept. 15	Oct. 4
*Sukkoth (1st day)	Sept. 23	Oct. 11	Oct. 1	Sept. 20	Oct. 9
Hoshana Rabba	Sept. 29	Oct. 17	Oct. 7	Sept. 26	Oct. 15
Shemini Atzereth	Sept. 30	Oct. 18	Oct. 8	Sept. 27	Oct. 16
Simhath Torah	Oct. 1	Oct. 19	Oct. 9	Sept. 28	Oct. 17
Hanukkah	Dec. 1-8	Dec. 20-27	Dec. 9-16	Nov. 29-Dec. 6	Dec. 17-24
Hamishah Asar Bishvat	Jan. 18	Feb. 7	Jan. 27	Jan. 17	Feb. 3
Purim	Mar. 18	Mar. 8	Feb. 25	Mar. 16	Mar. 4
*Pesach (1st day)	Apr. 17	Apr. 7	Mar. 27	Apr. 15	Apr. 3
*Pesach (7th day)	Apr. 23	Apr. 13	Apr. 2	Apr. 21	Apr. 9
Lag B'Omer	May 20	May 10	Apr. 29	May 18	May 6
*Shavuoth	June 6	May 27	May 16	June 4	May 23
Tisha B'Av	Aug. 7	July 28	July 17	July 5	July 24

**Orthodox and Conservative congregations celebrate two days, Reform one day only.*

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