

The Unofficial Guide to the Jewish Holidays

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Most Jewish holidays loosely follow this pattern: They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat.

Some of these holidays are more widely celebrated than others. **Note:** All dates are the evenings on which the holiday begins (in 2009-10). Jewish holidays start and end at sundown. No joke.

Shabbat (Friday evening/Saturday)

Comes every week ~ Modeled on biblical mythology which says that God rested on the 7th day after creating the world ~ Today, Shabbat is a chance for us to catch our breath ~ Common rituals include eating challah (bread), lighting candles, and drinking wine ~ and watching Rabbis Baum and Barr at 6 PM EST on Fri. for streaming Shabbat services.

Rosh Hashanah (September 18, 2009)

The Jewish New Year ~ There are four Jewish new years, but this one is by far the most celebrated ~ Some eat apples and honey for a sweet New Year ~ Rosh Hashanah begins 10 days of repentance which lead to Yom Kippur ~ Videostreamed at OJCO.org.

Yom Kippur (September 27)

Literally, the "Day of Atonement" ~ A chance to reflect on the past year. What have we done right? What do we want to change? ~ A chance to restore relationships through apologizing for past transgressions ~ Some people fast all day, and then have a break the fast, where they eat far too much ~ Many people donate food to help those in need.

Sukkot (October 2)

Fall harvest holiday ~ Some people build a booth (called a sukkah) in their backyard in which to have meals and/or sleep ~ Reminiscent of our ancestors who had agricultural connections ~ Holiday symbols include lulav (branches) and etrog (looks like a big lemon).

Simchat Torah (October 10)

Torah is the first five books of the Bible ~ Celebrates the 1 year cycle — finishing the Torah and starting over again ~ Not celebrated as much as other fall holidays.

Hanukkah (December 10)

There are lots of ways to spell it: Chanukah, Hanukka, etc. ~ Commemorates events of history that took place around 2200 years ago ~ There was an evil king (named Antiochus). Jews fought back — led by Judah Macabee ~ Most children learn that there was a miracle & a tiny bit of oil lasted for 8 days. But, that didn't actually happen ~ People light candles for 8 nights (on their Hanukkah menorahs), eat chocolate coins (called gelt), play a spinning top game (called dreidel, which started as a gambling game in Germany), & exchange gifts.

Tu B'Shevat (January 29)

The New Year of the Trees (YES! This is one of the four new years) ~ Tu stands for the number 15 and Shevat is the name of the month ~ Falls at a time of year when trees are blossoming in Israel ~ Tu B'Shevat is not mentioned in the Bible ~ Today, it is often celebrated as a holiday that is about nature and the environment. Some people have a Tu B'Shevat seder, which is kinda sorta like a Passover seder.

Purim (February 27)

The story comes from the book of Esther. It's in the Bible and usually read from a scroll, called a megillah. Hence the expression, the whole megillah ~ The bad guy is Haman ~ Tradition says we are supposed to get so drunk that we don't know the difference between the good guys and the bad guys by the end of the story ~ It's usually celebrated as a fun holiday — with people dressed up in costumes, waving noisemakers (called graggers), and eating (especially 3 corner cookies called hamantaschen) ~ The part of the story most of us don't learn: At the end of the biblical legend, the Jews kill 75,000 innocent people.

Passover (March 29)

A holiday that is designed to remember the legendary Exodus from Egypt (although it's not historically accurate!) ~ Some people go to seder meals, read from a book called a Haggadah, and eat lots of symbolic foods ~ There's matzah (unleavened bread), bitter herbs (called maror) as a reminder of the bitterness of slavery, salt water which is reminiscent of tears, charoset (an apple and nut mixture that is said to look like what the slaves used to hold bricks together), and more ~ There are 4 questions, 4 cups of wine, and a story about 4 children. Coincidence? I think not. ~ Some Jews don't eat bread for the duration of the 7 day holiday. A great Haggadah is available for sale at OJCO.ORG.

Yom HaZikaron (April 17) and Yom HaAtzmaut (April 18)

Yom HaZikaron is Israeli Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Terrorism Remembrance Day ~ The day after is Israel's Independence Day ~ Israel became a state on May 14, 1948.

Shavuot (May 18)

Along with Passover and Sukkot, one of the 3 pilgrimage festivals in the Bible ~ It is often celebrated as the mythic anniversary of when God gave the Torah to Moses on Sinai (which scholarship rejects, of course!) ~ People eat a lot of dairy ~ Often, confirmation ceremonies fall on Shavuot.

