

Calendar of Jewish Holidays

All holidays start at sunset the day before and also end at sundown.

Sukkot

Seven-day holiday commemorating the fulfillment of God's promise to bring the Israelites to the Promised Land after forty years of wandering. Many people build a sukkah (booth), a temporary structure with a roof made of branches, modeled after the huts constructed in the desert. Also celebrated with the shaking of the lulav (assemblage of palm, willow and myrtle branches) and etrog (a lemon-like fruit).

Shemini Atzeret

Celebrated the day after Sukkot and thus sometimes considered an extension of that holiday. Marks the first time tefillat geshem (prayer for rain) is recited during services, a practice that continues until Pesach.

Simchat Torah

Celebrates the completion of the annual Torah-reading cycle. After finishing the last sentence of the chapter Devarim (Deuteronomy), the Torah is joyously paraded seven times around the synagogue. The new cycle begins immediately with a reading from Bereshit (Genesis).

Chanukah

Eight-day holiday commemorating the Jewish victory over the Syrians and the miracle of the rededication of the Temple, when oil meant to last for one day burned for eight. Celebrated by lighting candles in a chanukiah (a nine-branched candelabrum), eating latkes (potato pancakes), playing with dreidels (spinning tops) and giving money or gifts.

Tu B'Shevat

Biblical in origin, a holiday that celebrates springtime renewal and growth. Traditions include eating fruit and planting trees.

Purim

Joyous holiday commemorating the rescue of the Jews by Queen Esther and her uncle Mordecai from the evil Haman. The story is read aloud and when Haman is mentioned in the Megillah (scroll) of Esther, people scream and turn groggers (noisemakers) to drown out his name. Traditions include parties, dances, mishloach manot (gift-giving), and eating hamentashen (three-cornered, fruit-filled pastries). Some also fast on the day before Purim to remember the three-day fast Esther requested of the Jews of Persia.

Pesach

Celebrates the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. At the seder (service and festive meal), the Haggadah (collection of texts and commentaries on the Exodus) is read and symbolic foods are eaten. In remembrance of the departure of the Israelites, who could not wait for their bread to rise before fleeing, matzah (unleavened bread) is eaten for the eight days of Passover.

Yom HaShoah

Day chosen by the Israeli Knesset in 1951 to mourn the millions killed in the Holocaust. Often commemorated with speeches by survivors and the reading of names. In Israel, a siren's blast allows collective remembrance in a moment of silence.

Yom HaZikaron

Day of remembrance for all who sacrificed themselves for the state of Israel. Public observances include lighting of yearzeit (memorial) candles, visiting graves and reciting psalms. In Israel, sirens blast once in the morning and then in the evening to begin Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel Independence Day.

Yom HaAtzma'ut

On May 14, 1948 Israel was declared an independent state. Many Jews world-wide celebrate with parades, festivals and donations to Jewish charities.

Lag B'Omer

One-day suspension of the traditional mourning period during Sefirat HaOmer ("The Counting of the Omer"). On this day, a plague afflicting Rabbi Akiva's students ceased. Also commemorates Bar Kochba's recapture of Jerusalem from the Romans. Sefirat HaOmer is a seven-week period that begins the second night of Pesach and ends at Shavuot. The 32 mourning days during this time commemorate the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's students. Traditionally, weddings, festivities, and haircuts are prohibited during this time.

Fast of Tammuz

Fast from dawn until nightfall commemorating the day Moses broke the first Tablets of the Covenant because the Israelites made the Golden Calf. Also marks the beginning of the siege on Jerusalem before its destruction. Begins the Three Weeks, a mourning period ending at Tisha B'Av.

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