

Pesach—Passover

Month of Nisan

As a rule, the month of Nisan is considered to be one of extra joy. Traditionally, throughout the entire month, Tahanun is omitted from the prayer service, many public mourning practices (such as delivering a eulogy at a funeral) are eliminated, and voluntary fasting is prohibited.^[40] However, practices sometimes vary.

Eve of Passover and Fast of the Firstborn

The day before Passover (*Erev Pesach*, lit., "Passover eve") is significant for three reasons:

- It is the day that all of the involved preparations for Passover, especially elimination of leavened food, or *chametz*, must be completed. In particular, a formal search for remaining *chametz* is done during the evening of Erev Pesach, and all remaining *chametz* is finally destroyed, disposed of or nullified during the morning of Erev Pesach.^[42]
- It is the day observed as the Fast of the Firstborn (בכורות תענית). Jews who are firstborn^[Note 20] fast, in remembrance of the tenth plague, when God killed the Egyptian firstborn, while sparing the Jewish firstborn.^[43] This fast is overridden by a *seudat mitzvah*, a meal celebrating the fulfillment of a commandment; accordingly, it is almost universal for firstborn Jews to attend such a meal on this day^[Note 21] so as to obviate their need to fast.
- During the era of the Temple in Jerusalem, the *Korban Pesach*, or sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb, was carried out the afternoon of 14 Nisan in anticipation of its consumption on Passover night.^[42]

When Passover starts on Sunday, and the eve of Passover is therefore Shabbat, the above schedule is altered. See *Eve of Passover on Shabbat* for details.

Passover

Main article: Passover

Passover (פסח) ("*Pesach*"), also known liturgically as חג המצות ("*Hag haMatzot*", the "Festival of Unleavened Bread"), is one of the Three Pilgrimage Festivals (*shalosh regalim*) mentioned in the Bible. Passover commemorates the liberation of the Israelite slaves from Egypt.^[44] No *chametz* (leavened food) is eaten, or even owned, during the week of Passover, in commemoration of the fact that the Israelites left Egypt so quickly that their bread did not have enough time to rise.^[45] Observant Jews go to great lengths to remove all *chametz* from their homes and offices in the run-up to Passover.^[46]

Along with the avoidance of *chametz*, the principal ritual unique to this holiday is the seder. The *seder*, meaning "order", is an ordered ritual meal eaten on the first night of Passover, and outside Israel also on the second night. This meal is known for its distinctive ritual foods—matzo (unleavened bread), maror (bitter herbs), and four cups of wine—as well as its prayer text/handbook/study guide, the Haggadah. Participation in a Passover seder is one of the most widely observed of Jewish rituals, even among less affiliated or less observant Jews.^[47]

Passover lasts seven days in Israel (as per Ex. 12:15), and eight days outside of Israel. The holiday of the last day of Passover (outside Israel, last two days) commemorates the Splitting of the Red Sea; according to tradition this occurred on the seventh day of Passover.^[48]

Pesach Sheni

Pesach Sheni (פסח שני) ("Second Passover") is a day prescribed in the Torah^[49] to allow those who did not bring the Paschal Lamb offering (*Korban Pesach*) a second chance to do so. Eligibility was limited to those who were distant from Jerusalem on Passover, or those who were ritually impure and ineligible to participate in a sacrificial offering. Today, some have the custom to eat matzo on Pesach Sheni, and some make a small change to the liturgy.

SABBATH

Jewish law (*halacha*) accords Shabbat (שַׁבָּת) the status of a holiday, a day of rest celebrated on the seventh day of each week. Jewish law defines a day as ending at either sundown or nightfall, when the next day then begins. Thus,

- Shabbat begins just before sundown Friday night. Its start is marked by the lighting of Shabbat candles and the recitation of Kiddush over a cup of wine; and
- Shabbat ends at nightfall Saturday night. Its conclusion is marked by the prayer known as Havdalah.

The fundamental rituals and observances of Shabbat include:

- Reading of the Weekly Torah portion
- Abbreviation of the Amidah in the three regular daily services to eliminate requests for everyday needs
- Addition of a musaf service to the daily prayer services
- Enjoyment of three meals, often elaborate and/or ritualized, through the course of the day
- Restraint from performing *melacha* (see above).

In many ways *halakha* (Jewish law) sees *Shabbat* as the most important holy day in the Jewish calendar.

- It is the first holiday mentioned in the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible), and God was the first one to observe it (Genesis).
- The Torah reading on *Shabbat* has more sections of *parshiot* (Torah readings) than on Yom Kippur or any other Jewish holiday.
- The prescribed penalty in the Torah for transgression of *Shabbat* prohibitions is death by stoning (Exodus 31), while for other holidays the penalty is (relatively) less severe.
- Observance of Shabbat is the benchmark used in *halacha* to determine whether an individual is a religiously observant, religiously reliable member of the community.

ROSCH CHODESH - The New Month

Rosh Chodesh (ראש חודש) (lit., "head of the month") is a minor holiday or observance occurring on the first day of each month of the Jewish calendar, as well as the last day of the preceding month if it has thirty days.

- Rosh Chodesh observance during at least a portion of the period of the prophets could be fairly elaborate.^[14]
- Over time there have been varying levels of observance of a custom that women are excused from certain types of work.^[15]
- Fasting is normally prohibited on Rosh Chodesh.

Beyond the preceding, current observance is limited to changes in liturgy.

In the month of Tishrei, this observance is superseded by the observance of Rosh Hashanah, a major holiday.

Related observances:

- The date of the forthcoming Rosh Chodesh is announced in synagogue on the preceding Sabbath.
- There are special prayers said upon observing the waxing moon for the first time each month.

Hanukkah—Festival of Lights

The story of Hanukkah (חנוכה) is preserved in the books of the First and Second Maccabees. These books are not part of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), they are apocryphal books instead. The miracle of the one-day supply of olive oil miraculously lasting eight days is first described in the Talmud (Shabbat 21b), written about 600 years after the events described in the books of Maccabees.^[29]

Hanukkah marks the defeat of Seleucid Empire forces that had tried to prevent the people of Israel from practicing Judaism. Judah Maccabee and his brothers destroyed overwhelming forces, and rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem. The eight-day festival is marked by the kindling of lights—one on the first night, two on the second, and so on—using a special candle holder called a *Hanukkiah*, or a *Hanukkah menorah*.

Religiously, Hanukkah is a minor holiday. Except on Shabbat, restrictions on work do not apply.^[Note 14] Aside from the kindling of lights, formal religious observance is restricted to changes in liturgy. Hanukkah celebration tends to be informal and based on custom rather than law. Three widely practiced customs include:

- Consumption of foods prepared in oil, such as potato pancakes or jelly doughnuts, commemorating the miracle of oil
- Playing the game of dreidel (called a *sevivon* in Hebrew), symbolizing Jews' disguising of illegal Torah study sessions as gambling meetings during the period leading to the Maccabees' revolt^[Note 15]
- Giving children money, especially coins, called Hanukkah gelt. However, the custom of giving presents is of far more recent, North American, origin, and is connected to the gift economy prevalent around North American Christmas celebrations.^[Note 16]

PURIM - Festival of Lots

The festival of Purim is celebrated every year on the 14th of the Hebrew month of Adar (late winter/early spring). It commemorates the salvation of the Jewish people in ancient Persia from Haman's plot "to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, infants and women, in a single day."

The story in a nutshell:

The Persian empire of the 4th century BCE extended over 127 lands, and all the Jews were its subjects. When King Ahasuerus had his wife, Queen Vashti, executed for failing to follow his orders, he orchestrated a beauty pageant to find a new queen. A Jewish girl, Esther, found favor in his eyes and became the new queen—though she refused to divulge the identity of her nationality.

Meanwhile, the anti-Semitic Haman was appointed prime minister of the empire. Mordechai, the leader of the Jews (and Esther's cousin), defied the king's orders and refused to bow to Haman. Haman was incensed, and convinced the king to issue a decree ordering the extermination of all the Jews on the 13th of Adar—a date chosen by a lottery Haman made.

Mordechai galvanized all the Jews, convincing them to repent, fast and pray to G-d. Meanwhile, Esther asked the king and Haman to join her for a feast. At the feast, Esther revealed to the king her Jewish identity. Haman was hanged, Mordechai was appointed prime minister in his stead, and a new decree was issued—granting the Jews the right to defend themselves against their enemies.

On the 13th of Adar, the Jews mobilized and killed many of their enemies. On the 14th of Adar, they rested and celebrated.

It is also customary for children to dress up in disguising costumes.

Rosh Hashanah—The Jewish New Year

Selichot

The month of Elul that precedes Rosh Hashanah is considered to be a propitious time for repentance.^[16] For this reason, additional penitential prayers called Selichot are added to the daily prayers, except on Shabbat. Sephardi Jews add these prayers each weekday during Elul. Ashkenazi Jews recite them from the last Sunday (or Saturday night) preceding Rosh Hashanah that allows at least four days of recitations.

According to oral tradition, Rosh Hashanah (ראש השנה) (lit., "Head of the Year") is the Day of Memorial or Remembrance (יום הזכרון),^[17] and the day of judgment (יום הדין, *Yom HaDin*).^[18] God appears in the role of King, remembering and judging each person individually according to his/her deeds, and making a decree for each person for the following year.^[19]

The holiday is characterized by one specific mitzvah: blowing the *shofar*.^[20] According to the Torah, this is the first day of the seventh month of the calendar year,^[20] and marks the beginning of a ten-day period leading up to Yom Kippur. According to one of two Talmudic opinions, the creation of the world was completed on Rosh Hashanah.^[21]

Morning prayer services are lengthy on Rosh Hashanah, and focus on the themes described above: majesty and judgment, remembrance, the birth of the world, and the blowing of the *shofar*. Ashkenazi Jews recite the brief *Tashlikh* prayer, a symbolic casting off of the previous year's sins, during the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah.

The Bible specifies Rosh Hashanah as a one-day holiday,^[20] but it is traditionally celebrated for two days, even within the Land of Israel. (See *Second day of Biblical festivals*, above.)

Sukkot—Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles)

Sukkot (סוכות or סוכוֹת, *sukkōt*) or *Succoth* is a seven-day festival, also known as the Feast of Booths, the Feast of Tabernacles, or just Tabernacles. It is one of the Three Pilgrimage Festivals (*shalosh regalim*) mentioned in the Bible. Sukkot commemorates the years that the Jews spent in the desert on their way to the Promised Land, and celebrates the way in which God protected them under difficult desert conditions. The word *sukkot* is the plural of the Hebrew word *sukkah*, meaning booth. Jews are commanded to "dwell" in booths during the holiday.^[27] This generally means taking meals, but some sleep in the *sukkah* as well, particularly in Israel. There are specific rules for constructing a *sukkah*.

Along with dwelling in a *sukkah*, the principal ritual unique to this holiday is use of the Four Species (*lulav* (palm), *hadass* (myrtle), *aravah* (willow) and *etrog* (citron)).^[28] On each day of the holiday other than Shabbat, these are waved in association with the recitation of Hallel in the synagogue, then walked in a procession around the synagogue called the *Hoshanot*.

The seventh day of the Sukkot is called Hoshanah Rabbah, the "Great *Hoshanah*" (singular of *Hoshanot* and the source of the English word *hosanna*). The climax of the day's prayers includes seven processions of *Hoshanot* around the synagogue. This tradition mimics practices from the Temple in Jerusalem. Many aspects of the day's customs also resemble those of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Hoshanah Rabbah is traditionally taken to be the day of the "delivery" of the final judgment of Yom Kippur, and offers a last opportunity for pleas of repentance before the holiday season closes.

Outside of Israel, meals are still taken in the Sukkah on the eighth day, Shemini Atzeret, a holiday in its own right. (See following section.)

Yom Kippur—Day of Atonement

Yom Kippur (יום כיפור) is the holiest day of the year for Jews.^[Note 12] Its central theme is atonement and reconciliation. This is accomplished through prayer and complete fasting—including abstinence from all food and drink (including water) —by all healthy adults.^[Note 13] Bathing, wearing of perfume or cologne, wearing of leather shoes, and sexual relations are some of the other prohibitions on Yom Kippur—all them designed to ensure one's attention is completely and absolutely focused on the quest for atonement with God. Yom Kippur is also unique among holidays as having work-related restrictions identical to those of Shabbat. The fast and other prohibitions commence on 10 Tishrei at sunset—sunset being the *beginning* of the day in Jewish tradition.

A traditional prayer in Aramaic called *Kol Nidre* ("All Vows") is traditionally recited just before sunset. Although often regarded as the start of the Yom Kippur evening service—to such a degree that *Erev Yom Kippur* ("Yom Kippur Evening") is often called "Kol Nidre" (also spelled "Kol Nidrei")—it is technically a separate tradition. This is especially so because, being recited before sunset, it is actually recited on 9 Tishrei, which is the day *before* Yom Kippur; it is not recited on Yom Kippur itself (on 10 Tishrei, which begins *after* the sun sets).

The words of Kol Nidre differ slightly between Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions. In both, the supplicant prays to be released from all personal vows made to God during the year, so that any unfulfilled promises made to God will be annulled and, thus, forgiven. In Ashkenazi tradition, the reference is to the coming year; in Sephardic tradition, the reference is to the year just ended. Only vows between the supplicant and God are relevant. Vows made between the supplicant and other people remain perfectly valid, since they are unaffected by the prayer.

In traditional communities, men wear the *kittel* throughout the day's prayers. A *Tallit* (four-cornered prayer shawl) is donned for evening and afternoon prayers—the only day of the year in which this is done. The prayers on Yom Kippur evening are lengthier than on any other night of the year. Once services reconvene in the morning, the services (in all traditions) are the longest of the year. In some traditional synagogues prayers run continuously from morning until nightfall, or nearly so. Two highlights of the morning prayers in traditional synagogues are the recitation of *Yizkor*, the prayer of remembrance, and of liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) describing the temple service of Yom Kippur.

Two other highlights happen late in the day. During the *Minchah* prayer, the haftarah reading features the entire Book of Jonah. Finally, the day concludes with *Ne'ilah*, a special service recited only on the day of Yom Kippur. *Ne'ilah* deals with the closing of the holiday, and contains a fervent final plea to God for forgiveness just before the conclusion of the fast. Yom Kippur comes to an end with the blowing of the *shofar*, which marks the conclusion of the fast. It is always observed as a one-day holiday, both inside and outside the boundaries of the Land of Israel.

Yom Kippur is considered, along with 15th of Av, as the happiest days of the year (Talmud Bavli—Tractate Ta'anit).