

UNDERSTANDING JEWISH CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

This guide was produced by the Jewish Federation of Cleveland as part of our ongoing commitment to fostering understanding and strengthening community partnerships. It is designed to deepen awareness of the Jewish community by offering an introductory overview of major Jewish holidays, customs, and traditions.

Whether you are seeking to better understand a Jewish colleague's request for time off, planning inclusive programming, or simply curious about the traditions practiced by your neighbors, this guide provides an accessible entry point into Jewish observance.



**HERE
FOR
GOOD**

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WHAT IS JUDAISM

Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people and, at over 3,500 years old, is one of the oldest major religious traditions still practiced today. Its values and history are a major part of the foundations of Christianity and Islam.

There are approximately 15 million Jewish people in the world, 40 percent of whom live in the United States. Cleveland is home to approximately 93,200 people living in 36,100 Jewish households. There are several types of Jewish religious denominations/practices:

Orthodox

Orthodox Jews regard the *Torah* (the primary holy text in Judaism) as being given directly by G-d on Mount Sinai and hold it in the highest authority. Members of these communities are sometimes identifiable through their mode of dress and strict customs. Some Orthodox men may wear black hats, while others wear only *yarmulkes* (head coverings) (pronounced: YAH-mi-keh). Women generally dress in more modest attire.

Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform

Members of these movements take a much more modern approach towards Judaism while still retaining its principles and morals. They do not generally observe the faith in the same way as Orthodox Jews would. For example, male Orthodox Jews will usually wear a head covering, which they believe shows respect for G-d. Most Reform Jews do not practice this ritual.

Many Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform Jews may also not be as stringent when it comes to keeping *Shabbat* (Sabbath) observance or kosher dietary laws. In addition, women serve as rabbis, and men and women sit together in synagogue.

There are also many people who are not affiliated with any denomination and do not practice the traditional laws but still identify as Jews. The simple descriptions above are meant for illustrative purposes only – there are many exceptions to these descriptions. These religious denominations also share common values such as a sense of Jewish responsibility to improve the world and a sense of being part of, and responsible for, the universal Jewish community.



the religion of
the Jewish people



THE JEWISH LIFE CYCLE

Birth

Every Jewish boy is required to be circumcised in a ceremony called *brit milah* or *bris* (covenant of circumcision). This takes place when the baby is eight days old, or as soon as possible thereafter if there are medical reasons for a delay. The circumcision is performed by a *mohel* (pronounced: mo-hel), a trained Jewish practitioner who may also be a registered medical doctor. In the Orthodox community, a boy's name is frequently not announced until the circumcision. Girls are usually named in the synagogue, often on the Shabbat following the birth.

Bar Mitzvah / Bat Mitzvah

Boys are recognized as full adult members of the community at age 13, when they celebrate their *bar mitzvah* (son of the commandments). Girls reach this stage at 12 when they celebrate their *bat mitzvah* (daughter of the commandments). Both boys and girls have a period of intense study leading up to the occasion. After a *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, many Jewish adolescents hold more responsibilities in their community, like fasting on *Yom Kippur*.

Weddings

Jewish weddings can occur on any day of the week except Shabbat, holidays, and particular mourning periods in the Jewish calendar. A Jewish wedding may take place in any location.

Death and Mourning

When a Jewish person dies, it is crucial that the body is treated with care and extreme reverence at all times. There are special rules for the preparation of the body for burial, and the body should not be left unattended at any time.

Autopsies are not permitted in Jewish law. Cremation is also not permitted according to Jewish law. After the funeral, the immediate family of the deceased mourns at home for seven days. This is known as *shiva* (seven-day mourning period) (pronounced: shi-vah), when mourners receive visitors. Hours of visitation are usually publicly posted.



bris • bar mitzvah
bat mitzvah • shiva



FOOD

The Jewish dietary laws, known as *kashrut* (kosher) (pronounced: kash-root), govern the way kosher food is manufactured and served.

Jews who observe these dietary laws will only eat food manufactured or cooked bearing the reliable seal of approval by a rabbinic authority. This includes meat slaughtered through *shechita* (Jewish ritual method) (pronounced: shay-khee-tah), which is similar to – but distinct from – the Muslim halal requirements.

What is considered kosher?

Meat

According to Jewish law, a kosher animal is required to “chew the cud” and have cloven (split) hooves. Therefore, products from cows or sheep are permitted, but those from pigs are prohibited.

Poultry

Most poultry, including chicken, turkey, duck, and goose are permitted, but birds of prey are not.

Seafood

To be considered kosher, fish must have fins and scales. Shellfish, octopus, and oysters are not.

Separating meat and milk

Those that observe dietary laws may not consume milk and meat together. It is traditional to wait between one to six hours after eating meat or poultry before consuming any dairy products. Separate utensils and cooking equipment for dairy and meat are also required.

Kosher shopping and restaurants

To accommodate kosher Jewish customers, manufacturers often produce a range of products that are specially supervised by a rabbinic authority. Even if the product is marked as vegetarian, the food may still have been made on the same factory line as non-kosher foods. Special care and attention is also required when eating in restaurants. Many Orthodox Jews will only eat in a restaurant which is supervised by a rabbinical authority. There are a variety of levels of observance in the overall Jewish community. Some Jews may be happy to eat in an unsupervised restaurant. It is therefore appropriate to ask your dining partner about their level of observance.

As with all Jewish laws and customs, there are Jews who do not observe these laws.



Some common kosher symbols found on manufactured food



kosher dietary laws



SHABBAT

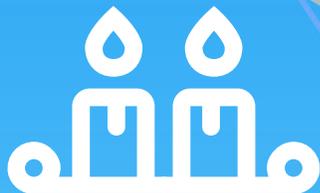
Shabbat (Sabbath) (pronounced: Sha-Baat) is one of the most important parts of the Jewish faith. Jews are required to refrain from various acts of “work” on *Shabbat* in commemoration of G-d’s cessation of work on the seventh day of creation. Instead, the day is traditionally spent engaged in religious study and prayer, as well as enjoying time with family and friends.

What is considered “work”?

On Shabbat, prohibited activities are defined by 39 main categories of labor, primarily derived from the activities related to the construction of the Tabernacle. Any work forbidden on *Shabbat* are extensions of one of these categories of labor (ex: planting, cooking, writing, building, etc.). Orthodox Jews generally refrain from such activities as:

- **Driving a car**
- **Using any electronic equipment**
- **Switching lights on and off**
- **Handling money**
- **Writing**
- **Using a telephone**
- **Pressing the “walk button” at a traffic light**

Many other Jews observe *Shabbat* by avoiding their regular work responsibilities and household chores, prioritizing rest and reflection.



Shabbat begins every Friday at sunset and concludes one hour after sunset on Saturday.



JEWISH HOLIDAYS

The Jewish calendar has many festival and special days that commemorate major events in Jewish history.

For a full list of Jewish holidays, visit
accessjewishcleveland.org/jewish-holidays/



JEWISH HOLIDAYS ROSH HASHANAH

Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) (pronounced: Rosh Ha-shah-nah) takes place over two days in September or October and is considered one of the most important periods in the Jewish calendar. It is an opportunity for reflection on one's actions in the previous year, and it is one of the most widely observed Jewish holidays.

***Rosh Hashanah* customs**

- **Shofar blowing:** the *shofar* (ram's horn) (pronounced: sho-far) is blown in synagogues and homes as a call to repentance.
- **Eating symbolic foods:** apples dipped in honey are eaten to symbolize hopes for a sweet new year. Other symbolic foods include pomegranates, round challah bread, and the head of a fish.
- **Tashlich ceremony:** Many Jews perform *Tashlich* (to cast away) (pronounced: tash-likch), symbolizing casting off sins by throwing breadcrumbs into a body of flowing water.

How to participate

- **Extend greetings** like "*Shana Tova!*" (pronounced: Shah-nah To-vah) meaning "Good Year!"
- **Recognize the holiday** with a communication highlighting the values of reflection, renewal, and community that *Rosh Hashanah* represents.
- **Visit local *Rosh Hashanah* celebrations** by contacting local synagogues and Jewish institutions. Note that many observant Jews do not use electronics or work on this holiday.
- **Accommodate religious observance** by not scheduling meetings and events.



Jewish new year



JEWISH HOLIDAYS YOM KIPPUR

Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) (pronounced: Yome Kee-poor) is the **most solemn day** in the Jewish calendar and involves praying for forgiveness for sins committed in the past year and demonstrating repentance.

Yom Kippur customs

- **Fasting:** Every Jewish person, except children and those who are ill, is required to abstain from food or drink for 25 hours – from sundown until nightfall the next day.
- **Prayer service:** Extensive prayers are held in synagogues, beginning with the *Kol Nidre* (All Vows) (pronounced: Kole Nee-dray) service on the eve of *Yom Kippur*, and extending through the entire following day.
- **Special clothing:** Many people wear white clothing as a symbol of purity and abstain from wearing leather shoes to practice humility.

How to participate

- **Extend greetings** like "*G'mar Chatimah Tovah*" (May you be sealed in the Book of Life) (pronounced: guh-MAR kha-tee-MAH toh-VAH) or simply "Have an easy and meaningful fast".
- **Recognize the holiday** with a communication highlighting the values of reflection, forgiveness, and renewal that *Yom Kippur* represents.
- **Accommodate religious observance** by not scheduling meetings and events.



day of atonement



JEWISH HOLIDAYS

SUKKOT SHEMINI ATZERET SIMCHAT TORAH

It is important to note that in 2023, the October 7th attacks in Israel occurred on *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah*. This has created a complex emotional landscape for many Jewish communities as they approach these normally joyous holidays.



fall holidays

These three different holidays form a connected series of fall festivals in the Jewish calendar:

Sukkot (pronounced: soo-KOHT): A seven-day festival beginning five days after *Yom Kippur*, traditionally marking the fall harvest in the land of Israel.

Shemini Atzeret (pronounced: shuh-MEE-nee ah-TZEH-ret): Literally "Eighth Day of Assembly," this one-day holiday immediately follows *Sukkot*.

Simchat Torah (pronounced: seem-KHAT toe-RAH): Celebrates the completion of the annual *Torah* reading cycle. In Israel and Reform Judaism, it's combined with *Shemini Atzeret*; elsewhere, it's observed the day after.

While distinct, these holidays are often seen as a unit, with *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah* serving as a joyous conclusion to the *Sukkot* period.

Holiday customs

- **Sukkot** is rich in distinctive customs. The most visible is the construction and use of the *sukkah* (temporary outdoor shelter) (pronounced: suh-kuh), which is reminiscent of the dwellings used by the Israelites in the wilderness. Jews are commanded to "dwell" in the *sukkah* for seven days, which typically involves studying, eating meals there, and for some, sleeping in it.
- **Shemini Atzeret:** The most significant custom is *Tefilat Geshem* (the prayer for rain) which marks the beginning of the rainy season in Israel.
- **Simchat Torah:** This holiday is celebrated with exuberant dancing and singing during *hakafot* (joyous processions where congregants parade *Torah* scrolls around the synagogue). All *Torah* scrolls are removed from the synagogue's ark, where they are kept, for these processions, emphasizing the *Torah's* centrality to the community.

How to participate

- **Extend greetings** like "*Chag Sameach*" (pronounced: KHAG sah-MAY-akh) for all three holidays.
- **Visit a Sukkah** and gather with others for a meal.
- **Be mindful** of scheduling as observant Jews refrain from work during the first two days of *Sukkot*, as well as *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah*. Most observant Jews work on the intermediate days of *Sukkot*, but are required to eat their meals in the *Sukkah*.



Chanukah is a joyous festival celebrated in the winter around Christmastime. It is an eight-day festival commemorating the re-dedication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, following the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire in the 2nd century BCE. The holiday celebrates the miracle of a small quantity of oil, meant to light the Temple's menorah for just one day, which burned for eight full days. *Chanukah* is a working holiday, with no restrictions on regular activities.

The holiday's name has several English spellings, including *Chanukah*, *Hanukkah*, and *Hanukah*, all of which are considered acceptable.

Chanukah customs

- **Menorah Lighting:** Each night, an additional candle is lit on the nine-branched menorah using the *shamash* (center helper candle) (pronounced: shah-mash). The menorah is often placed in windows to publicize the miracle.
- **Traditional Foods:** Foods cooked in oil commemorate the Temple miracle, including *latkes* (potato pancakes) and *sufganiyot* (jelly doughnuts).
- **Gift-Giving:** While not historically part of *Chanukah*, many families exchange gifts, particularly in America where the holiday often coincides with the December holiday season.

How to participate

- **Extend greetings** like "Happy *Chanukah!*" or "*Chag Sameach!*" (pronounced: KHAG sah-MAY-akh).
- **Visit local celebrations** such as public menorah lights and other *Chanukah* celebrations.
- **Support local events** like family-friendly *Chanukah* activities to demonstrate community solidarity.



the festival of lights



JEWISH HOLIDAYS TU B'SHEVAT

Tu B'Shevat (pronounced: too bish-VAT) traditionally marks the start of the agricultural cycle for trees in the Land of Israel. This holiday has evolved into an important environmental awareness day, providing an opportunity for communities to discuss environmental stewardship and sustainability through a Jewish lens. *Tu B'Shevat* is a working holiday, with no restrictions on regular activities.

Tu B'Shevat customs

- **Seder celebrations:** Some communities host a special *Seder* (ritual meal) (pronounced: say-der) featuring fruits and nuts, particularly those mentioned in the Bible as growing in Israel.
- **Tree planting:** Where climate permits, communities often organize tree or flower planting events.

How to participate

- **Extend greetings** like "Happy *Tu B'Shevat!*"
- **Support** environmental initiatives and sustainability efforts
- **Attend local events** like a *Tu B'Shevat Seder* and environmental programs



new year for the trees



The Jewish festival of *Purim* (pronounced: poo-REEM) commemorates the salvation of the Jewish people from a plot to destroy them in the ancient Persian Empire as recounted in *Megillat Esther* (the Book of Esther). The holiday celebrates how Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai foiled the plans of Haman, a royal advisor who sought to annihilate the Jewish population. The holiday is known for its joyous, carnival-like atmosphere. *Purim* is a working holiday, with no restrictions on regular activities.

Purim customs

- **Reading the *Megillah* aloud** in synagogues, with the congregation drowning out Haman's name with *groogers* (noisemakers) whenever it is mentioned.
- **Many people dress in costumes**, symbolizing the hidden nature of G-d's presence in the *Purim* story and the theme of concealed identity.
- **People exchange gifts** of food and drink with friends and family, including traditional foods like *hamantaschen* (triangular pastries said to represent Haman's three-cornered hat) (pronounced: huh-men-tah-shen).

How to participate

- **Extend greetings** like "Happy *Purim*!"
- **Attend local *Purim* celebrations** like a community carnival or *Megillah* reading.
- **Participate in community food drives** associated with *Purim*'s tradition of giving gifts to those in need.



salvation of the Jewish people

JEWISH HOLIDAYS PASSOVER

This eight-day festival, which often coincides with the Easter weekend, recalls the freedom of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. To remember the haste with which they escaped, no leavened food such as bread, cereal, or beer, may be consumed or kept in the house during this holiday. As the story goes, the Israelites fled Egypt in such haste that there was no time for their bread to rise. Hence, Jewish people eat unleavened bread. Observance of *Pesach* (Passover) (pronounced: peh-sakh) is primarily in private homes.

Passover customs

- **The Seder meal:** This central ritual is a festive meal where participants retell the Exodus story and consume foods to symbolize the journey from slavery to freedom. Participants read texts from a book called the *Haggadah* (to tell [the story]) which guides the meal.
- **Matzah:** Passover emphasizes eating *matzah* (a flat, unleavened bread) (pronounced: maht-zuh), consumed in commemoration of the Israelites' hasty escape from Egypt.
- **Abstinence from bread and other leavened foods:** During the holiday, Jews abstain from leavened grain-based foods, including bread, crackers, and cake. In fact, before Passover, Jews thoroughly clean their homes, removing any trace of leavened foods.

How to participate

- **Extend greetings** like "Happy Passover!"
- **Ensure** those who observe Passover have access to specialized kosher for Passover food.
- **Visit** local Passover celebrations, specifically a Passover Seder.
- **Be mindful of scheduling** meetings and events.



freedom from slavery in Egypt



Shavuot (pronounced: sha-voo-oh-t) takes place seven weeks after Passover (usually around late May/early June) and celebrates the Jewish people receiving the *Torah*. The holiday lasts two days.

***Shavuot* customs**

- **All-night *Torah* study:** Many synagogues and communities hold all-night *Torah* study sessions.
- **Dairy foods:** There is a tradition to eat dairy foods like cheesecake and blintzes on *Shavuot*, representing the “land flowing with milk and honey” and hearkening back to when the Jews received the *Torah* on Mount Sinai and were unable to cook kosher meat, choosing to eat dairy instead.
- **Reading the Book of Ruth:** The biblical Book of Ruth, describing the heroism of Ruth, Judaism’s most famous Jew-by-choice, is read on *Shavuot*.

How to participate

- **Extend greetings** like “*Chag Sameach!*” (pronounced: KHAG sah-MAY-akh).
- **Recognize** the holiday with a communication highlighting the values of *Torah* study and ethical living that it represents.
- **Visit** local *Shavuot* celebrations by contacting local synagogues and Jewish institutions.
- **Accommodate religious observance** by not scheduling meetings and events.



chag sameach!



JEWISH HOLIDAYS CALENDAR

Jewish holidays begin at sundown on the evening before the dates noted below.

HEBREW CALENDAR YEAR	5786 - 87	5787 - 88	5788 - 89
Shabbat Jewish Sabbath	Every Fri. eve thru Sat. eve	Every Fri. eve thru Sat. eve	Every Fri. eve thru Sat. eve
SPRING	2026	2027	2028
Tu B'Shevat New Year for Trees	Feb 1-2 Sun. eve - Mon. eve	Jan 22-23 Fri. eve - Sat. eve	Feb 11-12 Fri. eve - Sat. eve
Purim Festival of Esther	Mar 2-3 Mon. eve - Tues. eve	Mar 22-23 Mon. eve - Tues. eve	Mar 11-12 Sat. eve - Sun. eve
Passover Festival of Freedom Beginning of Passover	Apr 1-3* Wed. eve - Fri. eve	Apr 21-23* Wed. eve - Fri. eve	Apr 10-12* Mon. eve - Wed. eve
Passover End of Passover	Apr 7-9* Tues. eve - Thurs. eve	Apr 27-29* Tues. eve - Thurs. eve	Apr 16-18* Sun. eve - Tues. eve
Shavuot Feast of Weeks	May 21-23* Thurs. eve - Sat. eve	June 10-12* Thurs. eve - Sat. eve	May 30-June 1* Tues. eve - Thurs. eve
FALL	2026	2027	2028
Rosh Hashanah Jewish New Year	Sept 11-13* Fri. eve - Sun. eve	Oct 1-3* Fri. eve - Sun. eve	Sept 20-22* Wed. eve - Fri. eve
Yom Kippur Day of Atonement	Sept 20-21* Sun. eve - Mon. eve	Oct 10-11* Sun. eve - Mon. eve	Sept 29-30* Fri. eve - Sat. eve
Sukkot Feast of Booths Beginning	Sept 25-27* Fri. eve - Sun. eve	Oct 15-17* Fri. eve - Sun. eve	Oct 4-6* Wed. eve - Fri. eve
Shemini Atzeret & Simchat Torah End of Sukkot & High Holiday Season	Oct 2-4* Fri. eve - Sun. eve	Oct 22-24* Fri. eve - Sun. eve	Oct 11-13* Wed. eve - Fri. eve
Chanukah Festival of Lights	Dec 4-12 Fri. eve - Sat. eve	Dec 24-Jan 1 Fri. eve - Sat. eve	Dec 12-20 Tues. eve - Wed. eve

January 27

International Holocaust Remembrance Day is a global day to remember the millions killed in the Holocaust.

October 7

Date of the 2023 attack on Israel that was the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust.



*These dates are holier and carry with them restrictions on work/school.

