



# A SHORT GUIDE TO JEWISH RELIGION & CULTURE AND HOLIDAYS & OBSERVANCES

A Jewish holiday guide and calendar for educational and professional spaces.

---

This short guide is intended to help:

- minimize scheduling conflicts with Jewish holidays
- foster a more inclusive workplace/school environment by offering useful tools for understanding and communicating with Jewish employees/students

It includes the following:

- Overview of Jewish religious denominations
- Short glossary of frequent and useful terms
- Summary of major Jewish holidays and appropriate greetings
- 5-year planning calendar (2024-2029)

## JEWISH RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS

**Reform:** Liberal denomination that emphasizes Jewish ethics and the concept of tikkun olam - “repairing the world.” Religious dietary and observance laws are optional.

- Additional smaller liberal Jewish denominations include Reconstructionist, Renewal, and Humanistic.

**Conservative:** Centrist denomination that maintains many traditional practices, but updates some to suit modern sensibilities. Many keep kosher and some observe holidays by refraining from work.

- Note that “Conservative” in this case does not refer to political leanings.

**Orthodox:** Strict interpretation and observance of holidays (refraining from work, commerce, electricity) and dietary laws (kashrut).

- Modern Orthodox Jews tend to obtain high levels of secular education and live lives more integrated into mainstream society.
- Haredi (which means “those who tremble in fear of God”) Jews tend to live and learn separate from mainstream society.

## JEWISH LIFE CYCLE EVENTS

**Bar/Bat Mitzvah:** Jewish coming-of-age ritual that involves extensive preparation and study, a ceremony at the synagogue, and a celebratory meal or party. Bar mitzvah (boys) at age 13; Bat mitzvah (girls) at age 12 or 13.

*Greeting:* Mazal Tov!

**Bris/Brit Milah:** The circumcision and naming ceremony on the 8th day after a baby boy’s birth, marking entrance into the Jewish community.

*Greeting:* Mazal Tov!

**Simchat Bat:** The naming ceremony for a baby girl, celebrated any time during the first year of life, marking the baby’s entrance into the Jewish community.

*Greeting:* Mazal Tov!

**Shiva:** A week-long period of mourning for direct relatives after the burial of the dead. Customary practice is a donation to a charity important to the deceased, in lieu of flowers.

*Greeting:* May your loved one’s memory be for a blessing.

## JEWISH OBSERVANCE

**Shabbat:** Weekly sabbath begins at sundown on Friday and ends at nightfall on Saturday. This day of rest often involves disconnecting from technology, spending time with family and friends, and attending synagogue. A family meal on Friday night features candle lighting, challah bread, and wine.

**High Holidays:** The Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur occur in the fall (Sept./ Oct.) and are widely celebrated and observed by the vast majority of American Jews, who will refrain from work, attend synagogue, and gather with family.

**Kosher/Kashrut:** Jewish dietary laws that stipulate that meat and milk products cannot be eaten together, and certain animals cannot be eaten at all (e.g., pork; shellfish). Many Jews who keep kosher, particularly Orthodox Jews, will only eat food that has been prepared under the supervision of a rabbi to ensure that all kashrut laws have been strictly followed.

**Kosher for Passover:** Special dietary laws for the 8 days of Passover, when matzah (unleavened cracker-like flatbread) is eaten, and it is prohibited to eat leavened foods like bread and other grain products.

**Synagogue:** A place of worship for Jews. Not to be confused with church, which is not a Jewish term. Synagogues typically have a sanctuary for communal prayer, plus rooms for study and social events.

## VARIATION IN OBSERVANCE

There is a wide variety of religious practices among Jews; therefore, some Jewish students and staff may be absent due to observance of holidays more than others. Most Jews across the religious spectrum do not work or attend school on the High Holidays (dates in red on calendar). Orthodox and some Conservative Jews will not work or attend school on “no-work” holidays (dates in blue on calendar). Jews who are strictly observant will also not write, drive, use any electricity or technology, or engage in commerce on these days.

## MAJOR JEWISH HOLIDAYS

**Shabbat (*shah-baht'*):** The Jewish sabbath is observed each week from shortly before sunset on Friday until an hour after sunset on Saturday. Observant Jews refrain from work and commerce, and devote time to rest, prayer, religious study, and festive meals with family and friends.

*Greeting:* Shabbat Shalom!

**Rosh Hashanah (*rosh' ha-shah-nah'*):** One of two High Holidays, the Jewish New Year celebrates creation and renewal, and marks the beginning of 10 days of introspection. Jews attend synagogue, hear the blast of the shofar (ram's horn), and enjoy festive meals with family and friends.

*Greeting:* Happy New Year! Shana Tova  
(Shah-nah' To-vah')

**Yom Kippur (*yome kee-poor'*):** The second High Holiday is the "Day of Atonement," the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. Jews fast for 25 hours, pray, reaffirm their faith, and ask for God's forgiveness.

*Greeting:* Have a Meaningful Fast; G'mar Hatima Tova  
(Guh-mar' Hah-tee-mah' To-vah')

**Sukkot (*soo-kote'*):** Week-long harvest festival during which Jews build and eat in outdoor booths that commemorate the huts Jews used as temporary dwellings in their biblical wanderings in the desert after the exodus from Egypt.

*Greeting:* Happy Holiday! Chag Sameach  
(Hag Sah-may'ach)

**Shemini Atzeret & Simchat Torah (*sheh-mee'nee ah-tzer'et & sim'hat to'rah*):** Celebrates the completion of the year-long cycle of reading the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible (Torah) and the start of the next cycle.

*Greeting:* Happy Holiday! Chag Sameach  
(Hag Sah-may'ach)

**Hanukkah (*ha'noo-kah*):** Celebrates the rededication of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem when a small bit of oil burned miraculously for 8 days, after the Maccabees ousted the occupying Syrian Greeks and secured the Jews' religious and political freedom.

*Greeting:* Happy Hanukkah! Hanukkah Sameach  
(Ha'noo-kah Sah-may'ach)

**Purim (*poor'rim*):** Celebrates the rescue of the Jews of ancient Persia from a plot to exterminate them, as recorded in the biblical Book of Esther.

*Greeting:* Happy Purim! Chag Purim Sameach  
(Hag Poor'im Sah-may'ach)

**Pesach (*pay'sach*) / Passover:** Week-long festival celebrates the Jews' freedom and exodus from Egypt. Jews gather at home the first two nights for a special meal (seder) with family and friends.

*Greeting:* Happy Passover! Chag Pesach Sameach  
(Hag Pay'sach Sah-may'ach)

### Yom Hashoah (*yome ha-shoh'ah*)

#### Jewish Holocaust Remembrance Day:

Commemorates the Hebrew calendar date of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising to honor those murdered in the Holocaust and the heroism of European Jews. Established by the State of Israel in 1951. This is the day the Jewish community commemorates the Holocaust, as distinguished from **International Holocaust Remembrance Day**, which the United Nations designated in 2005 to occur **annually on January 27**, the date of the liberation of Auschwitz.

**Shavuot (*shah-voo-ote'*):** Celebrates the Jewish people receiving the Torah (God's laws) on Mount Sinai.

*Greeting:* Happy Holiday! Chag Sameach  
(Hag Sah-may'ach)

### WHY DO THE DATES "MOVE"?

The exact dates of Jewish holidays and observances differ each year because the Hebrew (Jewish) calendar is lunar-based. All Jewish religious observances begin on the evening before the date indicated on conventional calendars and conclude at nightfall on the day of the holiday.

This 5-year calendar of major Jewish holidays and observances has been prepared by **American Jewish Committee** as an aid for planning and scheduling events (assemblies, conferences, exams, graduations, tournaments, trainings, etc.) to minimize conflicts that involve the absence of Jewish students and personnel.

**Expect virtually all Jewish students/employees to be absent on dates in red.**

**Expect some Jewish students/employees to be absent on dates in blue.**

Two additional annual dates to note:

**January 27\***

*International Holocaust Remembrance Day; date of the liberation of Auschwitz.*

**October 7\***

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

*\* It is permissible to work and attend school on these holidays.*



Hebrew Calendar Year	5785	5786	5787	5788	5789
<b>Shabbat</b> Jewish Sabbath	Every Friday eve thru Saturday eve	Every Friday eve thru Saturday eve	Every Friday eve thru Saturday eve	Every Friday eve thru Saturday eve	Every Friday eve thru Saturday eve
<b>FALL</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>2025</b>	<b>2026</b>	<b>2027</b>	<b>2028</b>
<b>Rosh Hashanah</b> Jewish New Year	<b>Oct 2-4</b> Wed. eve - Fri. eve	<b>Sept 22-24</b> Mon. eve - Wed. eve	<b>Sept 11-13</b> Fri. eve - Sun. eve	<b>Oct 1-3</b> Fri. eve - Sun. eve	<b>Sept 20-22</b> Wed. eve - Fri. eve
<b>Yom Kippur</b> Day of Atonement	<b>Oct 11-12</b> Fri. eve - Sat. eve	<b>Oct 1-2</b> Wed. eve - Thurs. eve	<b>Sept 20-21</b> Sun. eve - Mon. eve	<b>Oct 10-11</b> Sun. eve - Mon. eve	<b>Sept 29-30</b> Fri. eve - Sat. eve
<b>Sukkot</b> Feast of Booths Beginning	<b>Oct 16-18</b> Wed. eve - Fri. eve	<b>Oct 6-8</b> Mon. eve - Wed. eve	<b>Sept 25-27</b> Fri. eve - Sun. eve	<b>Oct 15-17</b> Fri. eve - Sun. eve	<b>Oct 4-6</b> Wed. eve - Fri. eve
<b>Shemini Atzeret &amp; Simchat Torah</b> End of Sukkot & High Holiday Season	<b>Oct 23-25</b> Wed. eve - Fri. eve	<b>Oct 13-15</b> Mon. eve - Wed. eve	<b>Oct 2-4</b> Fri. eve - Sun. eve	<b>Oct 22-24</b> Fri. eve - Sun. eve	<b>Oct 11-13</b> Wed. eve - Fri. eve
<b>Hanukkah*</b> Festival of Lights	<b>Dec 25-Jan 2</b> Wed. eve - Thurs. eve	<b>Dec 14-22</b> Sun. eve - Mon. eve	<b>Dec 4-12</b> Fri. eve - Sat. eve	<b>Dec 24-Jan 1</b> Fri. eve - Sat. eve	<b>Dec 12-20</b> Tues. eve - Wed. eve
<b>SPRING</b>	<b>2025</b>	<b>2026</b>	<b>2027</b>	<b>2028</b>	<b>2029</b>
<b>Purim*</b> Festival of Esther	<b>Mar 13-14</b> Thurs. eve - Fri. eve	<b>Mar 2-3</b> Mon. eve - Tues. eve	<b>Mar 22-23</b> Mon. eve - Tues. eve	<b>Mar 11-12</b> Sat. eve - Sun. eve	<b>Feb 28-Mar 1</b> Wed. eve - Thurs. eve
<b>Pesach</b> Festival of Freedom Beginning of Passover	<b>Apr 12-14</b> Sat. eve - Mon. eve	<b>Apr 1-3</b> Wed. eve - Fri. eve	<b>Apr 21-23</b> Wed. eve - Fri. eve	<b>Apr 10-12</b> Mon. eve - Wed. eve	<b>Mar 30-Apr 1</b> Fri. eve - Sun. eve
<b>Pesach</b> End of Passover	<b>Apr 18-20</b> Fri. eve - Sun. eve	<b>Apr 7-9</b> Tues. eve - Thurs. eve	<b>Apr 27-29</b> Tues. eve - Thurs. eve	<b>Apr 16-18</b> Sun. eve - Tues. eve	<b>Apr 5-7</b> Thurs. eve - Sat. eve
<b>Yom Hashoah*</b> Holocaust Remembrance Day	<b>Apr 23-24</b> Wed. eve - Thurs. eve	<b>Apr 13-14</b> Mon. eve - Tues. eve	<b>May 3-4</b> Mon. eve - Tues. eve	<b>Apr 23-24</b> Sun. eve - Mon. eve	<b>Apr 11-12</b> Wed. eve - Thurs. eve
<b>Shavuot</b> Feast of Weeks	<b>June 1-3</b> Sun. eve - Tues. eve	<b>May 21-23</b> Thurs. eve - Sat. eve	<b>June 10-12</b> Thurs. eve - Sat. eve	<b>May 30-June 1</b> Tues. eve - Thurs. eve	<b>May 19-21</b> Sat. eve - Mon. eve

## INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE JEWISH PEOPLE?

Explore the breadth of educational programs AJC offers: [AJC.org](https://www.ajc.org).

Reach out to request a presentation or workshop by an AJC educator: [education@ajc.org](mailto:education@ajc.org).



## SHAPE A NEW FUTURE THROUGH AJC

American Jewish Committee (AJC) is the global advocacy organization for the Jewish people.

From world capitals to college campuses, AJC works with leaders across society to stand up for Israel; confront antisemitism, no matter the source; and uphold the democratic values that unite us.

In the wake of Hamas' October 7 attack—the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust—AJC has mobilized its global network to tackle the unprecedented threats facing world Jewry. Join us. Together, we can shape a new future for Israel and the Jewish people.

