



# MAJOR JEWISH HOLIDAYS

Jewish Holidays come up as tossups and, oftentimes, as bonus parts. Here are a few of the most commonly asked holidays with brief descriptions of each.

(Study Guide by Matthew Baker)

## Rosh Hashanah:

- Meaning “**Head of the Year**”
- Date on Jewish Calendar: 1st and 2nd days of Tisrei (the seventh month)
- Celebration of the Jewish calendar **new year** (one of several Jewish “new years”)
- Beginning of the 10 **Days of Awe**
- Traditions: blowing the **Shofar** (a ram’s horn), eating **apples and honey** and round braided challah, symbolic casting away of sins (Tashlich)

## Yom Kippur:

- Meaning “**Day of Atonement**”
- Date on Jewish Calendar: 10<sup>th</sup> day of Tisrei
- Day of prayer and confession of sins
- End of the 10 **Days of Awe** – holiest day of the year
- Traditions: **fasting**, **Kol Nidre** (“all vows”) Service, wearing white, spending the day praying in place of worship

## Sukkot:

- Meaning “**Booths**”
- Date on Jewish Calendar: 15<sup>th</sup> of Tisrei
- Seven day **harvest festival**, memory of the Jewish people wandering the deserts after being freed from Egyptian slavery
- Traditions: building a **sukkah** (an outdoor open-air booth) and living/spending time inside; adorning the sukkah with fruits and gourds; ritual shaking of the **lulav** (branches of palm, willow, and myrtle) and the **etrog** (citrus fruit) inside the sukkah



## Chanukkah (Hanukkah):

- Meaning “Dedication”, called the **Festival of Lights**
- Jewish calendar date: 25<sup>th</sup> of Kislev (9th month of the Jewish calendar), lasts eight days
- Remembering the **miracle of the small amount oil lasting eight days and nights** in the rededicated Temple (Antiochus IV of Syria (circa 170 BC) had oppressed the Jews and had the Temple in Jerusalem converted to Hellenistic practices; the Jews revolted and successfully regained their Temple)
- Traditions: lighting candles each night in a nine pronged **Menorah** (a candelabrum) with the middle **shamash candle** for lighting the others; eating **Latkes** (Potato pancakes) and other fried foods (such as doughnuts); playing games with a **dreidel** – a four-sided spinning top

## Purim:

- Meaning “**Lots**”
- Date on Jewish Calendar: 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar (12<sup>th</sup> month of Jewish calendar)
- Celebration of Queen Esther saving the Jewish people, as recounted in the Book of Esther
  - Main characters: **Esther**, **Mordecai**, Persian **King Ahasuerus**, egotistical villain **Haman** who plotted to kill the Jewish people
  - Titular reference to Haman’s use of lots to decide the date of the Jew’s annihilation
- Traditions: reading the **Book of Esther**; booing/shouting to blot out the despised name of the villain Haman; spinning wooden noisemakers called **groggers**; eating **Hamamtashen** (triangular shaped cookies with sweet fillings, meant to portray the three-sided shape of Haman’s hat); dressing up in costumes

## Shavuot:

- Meaning “**Weeks**”
- Date on Jewish Calendar: 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> of Sivan (third month of Jewish Calendar)
- Celebration of the **giving of the Torah to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai**
- Traditions: reading the book of Ruth, eating dairy, studying Torah and praying all night

## Tisha B’Av:

- Meaning “Ninth of Av”
- Date on Jewish Calendar: 9<sup>th</sup> of Av (fifth month of Jewish calendar)
- **Mourning** over the historical suffering of the Jewish people
- Traditions: fasting



## Passover (Pesach):

- Meaning “to spare” or “to pass over”
- Date on Jewish Calendar: Starts 15<sup>th</sup> of Nissan (first month on the Jewish calendar)
- Remembrance of the **story of Exodus**: bondage in Egypt and G-d freeing the Jews via Moses
  - Titular reference of the Angel of Death passing over Jewish homes (marked with rams blood) during the 10<sup>th</sup> and final plague to force Pharaoh Ramses II to release the Jews
- Traditions: large **seder** (“ordered”) meal with many ritualistic consecutive parts, often read from a **Haggadah** book, including:
  - A seder plate of a bone, a roasted egg, *karpas*, horseradish, bitter herbs, and *charoset*
  - Retelling the story of Exodus
  - Asking the **Four Questions**
  - Pouring a glass of wine for the **prophet Elijah**
  - Hiding a piece of Matzah called the **Afikomen**
- **Avoiding consumption of leavened breads** (*chametz*) to remember how the freed Jews had to escape without time for their bread to rise; eating **Matzah** – unleavened bread

## Simchat Torah:

- Meaning “**Rejoicing the Torah**” (the Torah is the name for the Jewish holy book containing the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)
- Date on Jewish Calendar: 22<sup>nd</sup> of Tisrei
- Celebrating **completion of reading the Torah** (finishing the yearly cycle of reading a Torah portion every week)
- Traditions: dancing with the Torah and other festivities

## Tu B'Shevat:

- Meaning “15<sup>th</sup> of Shevat”
- Date on Jewish Calendar: 15<sup>th</sup> of Shevat (eleventh month of Jewish Calendar)
- “**Birthday of the Trees**” – historically used to measure age of fruit trees
- **One of the Jewish “new years”**
- Traditions: eating fruit or spices, planting trees

