

Jewish Holidays

Rosh Hashana

Rosh Hashanah means "first of the year". It is the **Jewish New Year**, and instead of being a time of frenetic partying, it is a holy day dedicated to reflection: Jews are to **think about the year that has passed**, try to identify mistakes they have made, and make resolutions to live a better life in the year to come. One of the traditional foods of Rosh Hashanah is **apples dipped in honey**; this is to symbolize everyone's wish for a sweet new year. Another important element in celebrating Rosh Hashanah is hearing the **shofar** in the synagogue. A shofar is a ram's horn which is blown to sound like a trumpet, and its notes are heard as a call to repentance.

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The Days of Awe

The Days of Awe, sometimes called the "**Days of Repentance**", are the **ten** days that begin with Rosh Hashanah and end with **Yom Kippur**. This period of time is meant to be one of very serious reflection and repentance. Jews believe that G-d, who is omniscient and just, has books in which He writes out what **everyone's life will be like** for the next year based in their actions in the previous year. G-d writes in these books on Rosh Hashanah, but nothing is final until Yom Kippur, when the books are "**sealed**" until next year. Jews believe, therefore, that if they seek reconciliation with people they may have wronged, practice acts of **charity** and **pray** during the Days of Awe, God will inscribe next to their names a good life for the next year.

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Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur is the **culmination** of the Days of Awe; it is known as the Day of **Atonement**, and is perhaps the most **important** Jewish holiday. It is also probably the holiday observed by the greatest number of Jews. Jews believe that it is on Yom Kippur that the **books** in which G-d **writes out our lives** for the next year are sealed. Since Yom Kippur is seen as a sort of **last chance** to appeal to G-d's mercy before His judgment is finalized, Jews spend most of the day in the **synagogue** praying. Yom Kippur is also a day of **strict fasting**--no food or drink may be taken from the evening before to **nightfall** on the day of Yom Kippur, and no **work** is allowed. Synagogue services include the blowing of the shofar as a call to repentance. Many Jews wear **white** on that day to symbolize **purity** and to remind them that God can make even the worst sins as white as snow.

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Sukkot

Five days after Yom Kippur, Jews celebrate the festival of **Sukkot**. In Hebrew, the word **sukkah** means "**booth**", and this holiday, which is one of the most **joyous** ones of the year, commemorates the **forty** years the Jews spent wandering in the desert after the exodus from Egypt. During this time, the **Israelites** lived in tents, and so modern day Jews remember this by building a **sukkah**, or tent, in which they eat their meals and, if the weather is nice, even sleep. Sukkot is also a **harvest festival**, so many Jews decorate their sukkot with corn, wheat, squash and other **vegetables**. This is easy to do, because Sukkot occurs around **Halloween** and Thanksgiving. The holiday lasts for **seven** days, and involves special **rituals**, prayers and songs.

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Channukah

Channukah is known as the **Festival of Lights**, and it is an eight day celebration commemorating a **miracle** that took place more than 2,000 years ago. When Antiochus IV was in control of Palestine, he persecuted the Jews and **desecrated** the Temple by instituting a pagan priest and ordering the **sacrifice** of pigs (a non-kosher animal). The Jews rebelled against this oppression and sacrilege, and when their attempts were successful, they rededicated the Temple. The only problem was, though, that there was just enough oil to light the **menorah** for one day. G-d, however, miraculously kept the menorah burning for **eight** days, and so Jews today keep an **eight** day festival to celebrate G-d's extraordinary providence.

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Purim

Purim is a **joyous** holiday which commemorates the Jews being **saved** by Esther, a beautiful young Jewish woman. The main command associated with Purim is to eat, drink and be merry. Jews also observe this holiday by making **donations** to charity, and sending gifts of **food** and **drink**.

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Passover

Passover (**Pesach** in Hebrew) is the Jewish **remembrance** of G-d's saving them and leading them out of **slavery** in Egypt. The holiday gets its name from the fact that G-d "**passed over**" the houses of the Israelites when He visited the **ninth** plague upon the stubborn Egyptians: the death of the **firstborn** sons. After this plague, Pharaoh gave in and let the Israelites go, only to change his mind and pursue them, but to no avail.

Jews observe Passover by removing all **leaven** (*a substance used to produce fermentation in dough or a liquid*) from their homes in remembrance of their ancestors who left Egypt in such a **rush** that they didn't have time to let the bread **rise**. This practice has a deeper meaning as well: it symbolizes removing the pride and arrogance that can "puff up" a person's soul.

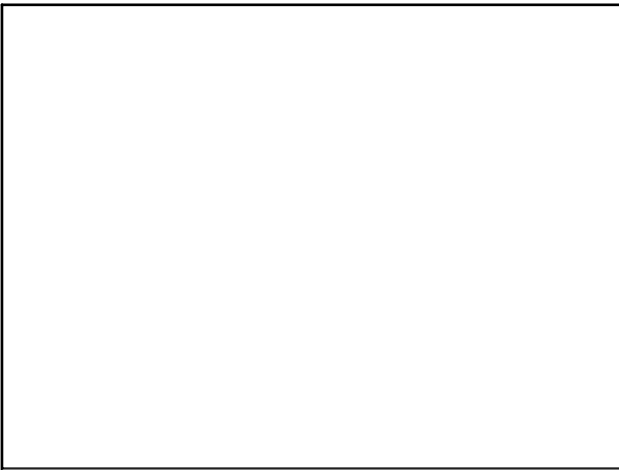
Passover lasts for **seven days**, and on the first night Jewish families celebrate a special meal, called a **Seder**, in which traditional and symbolic foods are eaten and special prayers are said.

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Shabbat

Shabbat, Hebrew for Sabbath, is the most **important** ritual observance for Jews. It begins at sunset **Friday** and lasts until **Saturday** evening. On Shabbat, all **work** is prohibited, and observant Jews spend the day in rest and **prayer**. There are two important commands related to Shabbat: **zachor**-- to remember, and **shamor**-- to observe. Jews are commanded to remember that after six days of creation, G-d rested. Human beings, therefore, when they cease from their work to rest, not only remember and acknowledge the **creative** power of G-d, but actually **imitate** His example. Jews also remember that, just as they are freed on Shabbat from their everyday work and worries, so their ancestors were freed from **slavery** in Egypt. Observing Shabbat consists primarily in refraining from all work, including writing and any form of **cooking** which involves igniting a fire (i.e. electricity). While these prohibitions may sound stifling, those who observe Shabbat look forward to it as a day of profound **peace**, rest and spiritual renewal-- a way to create **sacred** space in the hectic work-a-day world.

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