

Jewish Festivals & Holy Days

Shabbat

The Jewish Sabbath (from the root of the Hebrew word seventh for the Seventh Day of the Creation) starts on Friday afternoon at sunset and finishes on Saturday at sunset. It is customary for Jews to eat a special meal on Friday night with their extended family regardless of levels of observance.

Many Jewish students and staff will want to leave school early on Friday afternoons in the winter, because Shabbat starts 14 minutes before sunset on Friday, and this can be as early as 3:35 PM. They will need to be home well before this time in order to wash, change and get to the synagogue.

On the Jewish Sabbath and the festivals, it is forbidden to travel, work, cook, operate any machinery, use electricity, answer the telephone, cook or write. A Jewish pupil or member of staff will, therefore, need to leave work early on a Friday afternoon in order to arrive home early to finalise the cooking or heating of the food for the Sabbath, or attend synagogue for the Friday night prayers before sunset as travelling by car, or public transport, cooking, phoning or writing are forbidden after sunset. Jews may also wish to leave early in order to arrive home in time to take children to synagogue for special Friday night classes and services.

Shabbat might also make life difficult for staff or pupils if a school trip is planned over the weekend, since there are many activities which are forbidden on Shabbat.

In addition to Shabbat, such activities are also forbidden on Shavuot, the first two days and last two days of Pesach, the first two days of Sukkot, Simchat Torah and the day preceding it ("Shmini Atseret"), and Yom Kippur.

Hanukkah: Festival of Lights. It commemorates the Maccabean recapture and rededication of the Jerusalem Temple in 165-164B.C.E. Special readings and praise songs focus on liberty and freedom. The eight candle Menorah is lighted.

Passover / Pesach: eight day celebration of the deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. The story of the Exodus from Egypt is recounted, during a symbolic family meal (the Seder) and the ongoing struggle of all peoples for freedom from internal and external tyranny is celebrated.

During Pesach, there are strict limitations on what Jewish people may eat. Anything which is based on a grain and has undergone a leavening or fermenting process (such as bread, cake, beer, whisky) is forbidden throughout Pesach. Nor may one eat something which has been cooked in a vessel or oven which is normally used for cooking these foods, unless the vessel or oven has been cleaned in a specific way which would be impractical in a school.

Purim: celebration of the deliverance of the Jewish minority in Persia from genocide. Charity to the poor, sharing food with friends, and vigorous merrymaking mark the observance.

Rosh Hashanah: New Year takes place around September/October, and is considered one of the most important and serious holidays (or High Holy Days) in the Jewish calendar. It is a time for celebration, reflection and repentance for sins committed in the previous year. Rosh Hashanah is also a time for celebration - traditions include eating apples dipped in honey in the hope that this will lead to a sweet year.

Rosh Hashanah lasts for two days commencing on the evening before the first day. Families eat special meals together and attend synagogue. The two days of festival are days when members of the community will need to be able to celebrate fully.

Shavuot: Taking places seven weeks after Passover (usually around late May/early June), this festival commemorates Moses being given the Ten Commandments. The festival lasts two days and requires relatively little advance preparation; however, it is traditional to eat dairy products, as when the Jews were awaiting the arrival of their commandments and were unsure as to what their new dietary laws would be, they ate only dairy products and vegetables, to avoid eating the meat of any animals which might be forbidden.

Simchat Torah: Following immediately from Succot is Simchat Torah, which celebrates the end of the annual cycle of reading the Torah in synagogue - and starting reading from the beginning again.

Sukkot: This festival begins five days after the end of Yom Kippur and commemorates the booths the Israelites constructed in the wilderness and lived in after their exodus from Egypt. During the eight-day festival, Jews are supposed to live in a similar booth known as a Succah (dwelling) - the walls are made of wood and the ceiling of greenery to leave the stars visible. In countries such as Israel where the climate permits, many people sleep in the Succah, but elsewhere it is used mainly for meals only.

Work is not permitted during two holy days at the beginning and the end of this period when staff and students will request leave.

Tisha b'Av: The 9th of Av, is a solemn day commemorating the destruction of the Second Temple. On this day Jews will not work, will be fasting for 25 hours and spending the day in mourning and prayer. It will be necessary for members of the Jewish community to arrive home in time to eat before the fast commences. Services are held in the evening and early the following morning.

Tu B'shevat: celebrates the New Year for the Trees, rejoicing in the fruit of the tree and the fruit of the vine, celebrating the splendid, abundant gifts of the natural world. Tu B'Shevat marks the beginning of spring in Israel. To mark this moment, school children plant trees.

Yom Ha'atsma'ut: "Independence Day" is celebrated by some Jewish people as a religious festival. It marks the anniversary of the founding of the modern state of Israel

in May 1948. There are no major religious rituals for the day, but some Jewish people like to celebrate it with parties or by reflecting on the day.

This may cause tension with some other pupils and teachers, particularly Muslims who trace their family origins back to the Middle East. If teachers are aware of this, they will be able to research the issues and address them in a way that minimises conflict.

Yom Hashoah: Jewish Holocaust Day. The day has been established to remember six million Jews killed by the Nazis in 1933-1945. It is observed by many non-Jews as well.

Yom Kippur: The Ten Days of Repentance end with Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, which is the day on which the fates of all Jews are sealed for the coming year. This High Holy Day is the most solemn and serious day in the Jewish calendar, which involves praying for forgiveness for sins and afflicting oneself as punishment for those committed in the past year.

Jews fast (refraining from any food or drink) for 25 hours from sundown on the previous evening until sundown the next night, and are not allowed to work, bathe or wear leather shoes. The fast begins with a special evening service known as Kol Nidre (All Vows), and synagogue services last for the whole of the following day until the Fast ends. Jews are expected to spend the day in synagogue or in prayer.

Although it is a solemn day, Yom Kippur is also thought of as a happy day because it is the time for Jews to cleanse themselves of wrongdoings and reach a spiritual high. Fasting is not only done as a means of affliction but also because nothing is supposed to detract congregants from their prayers on the day. However, children below Barmitzvah or Batmitzvah age, pregnant women and diabetics are discouraged from fasting, as is anybody whose health is likely to be seriously affected by the 25-hour abstinence.

There are various other fast days in the Jewish calendar: Tsom Gedaliah (on the day after Rosh Hashanah), Asara b'Tevet (the tenth of Tevet, shortly after Chanukah), Ta'anit Esther (on the day before Purim), and Shiva Asar b'Tammuz (three weeks before Tisha B'Av).