



A GUIDE TO **Jewish Holidays** & **Observances**



This guide is designed to serve as a resource to help build an understanding of Jewish holidays and observances. It provides an overview for each, including cultural customs, important considerations and guidance for respectful participation.

It is important to recognize that the information included in this guide offers general insight into Jewish life and that practices and observances vary widely among individuals and communities. While these holidays are part of the religion of Judaism, not all Jewish people observe them from a religious perspective. Jewish identity extends beyond Judaism, with many individuals participating as expressions of tradition, culture and heritage.

This guide was developed in partnership with JUF's Jewish Community Relations Council.



— JEWISH UNITED FUND —
Jewish Community Relations Council



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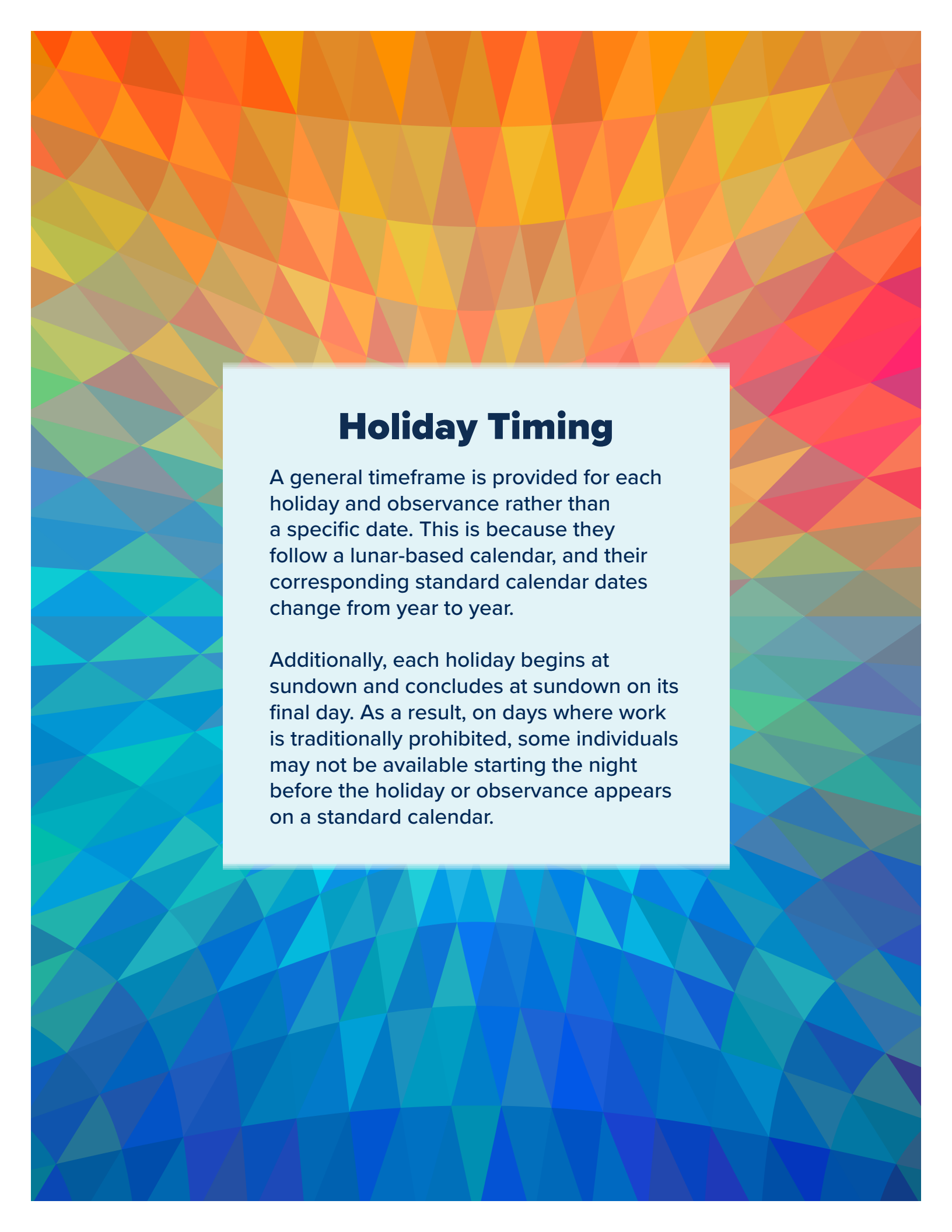
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Holiday Timing

A general timeframe is provided for each holiday and observance rather than a specific date. This is because they follow a lunar-based calendar, and their corresponding standard calendar dates change from year to year.

Additionally, each holiday begins at sundown and concludes at sundown on its final day. As a result, on days where work is traditionally prohibited, some individuals may not be available starting the night before the holiday or observance appears on a standard calendar.

Rosh Hashanah

ראש השנה

The Jewish New Year

September/Early October

Rosh Hashanah (ROSH hah-shah-NAH) is the Jewish New Year and marks the beginning of the High Holy Days (also known as the High Holidays), a 10-day period of reflection that culminates in Yom Kippur. The two-day holiday commemorates the creation of the world and emphasizes personal reflection, renewal and the opportunity for a fresh start.



Customs

- Sounding the **Shofar** (shoh-FAHR; an ancient instrument, usually made from a ram horn) serves as a spiritual wake-up call, encouraging reflection and change.
- Performing the **Tashlich** (tahsh-LEEKH) Ritual symbolically casts away sins by tossing breadcrumbs or pebbles into the water.

Symbolic Foods



Apples & Honey for a sweet new year.



Round Challah (KHAH-lah) to represent the cycle of the year.



Pomegranates to symbolize being fruitful.

Cultural Considerations

- The holiday is joyful and reflective.
- Many people choose to attend synagogue.
- Work and/or school may be taken off.

How to Participate

- Wish someone a happy new year by saying **Shanah Tova** (sha-NAH toh-VAH).
- **Attend a local celebration**—many Jewish organizations host holiday services, meals or educational events.

Yom Kippur

יום כיפור

The Day of Atonement

September/Early October

Yom Kippur (YOHM kih-POOR) is the holiest day of the year in Judaism. It is a day of fasting, prayer and reflection that completes the 10-day period of reflection that commences with Rosh Hashanah. Many individuals strive to amend their behavior and seek forgiveness for wrongs committed in the previous year.



Customs

- **Fasting** is observed to atone for sins and cleanse oneself for the year ahead, culminating in a celebratory meal.
- **Extensive prayer services** are held in synagogues for people to atone for their sins and seek forgiveness.
- **Wearing white clothing** serves as a symbol of purity and **abstaining from wearing certain items**, such as leather shoes or gold jewelry, shows humility.
- **Charitable giving**, known as tzedekah (tseh-dah-KAH), is encouraged as part of the atonement process.

Cultural Considerations

- It is the holiest and most solemn day in the Jewish year.
- Many people choose to attend synagogue.
- Work is traditionally forbidden on this day; therefore, work and/or school may be taken off.

How to Participate

- Wishing someone a **meaningful fast** shows respect for the holiday.
- **Be mindful of scheduling** for important events or deadlines.

Sukkot

סוכות

The Feast of Booths

Late September/October

Sukkot (soo-KOHT) is a seven-day harvest festival commemorating the 40 years the Israelites spent in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt that emphasizes gratitude for nature's bounty, reliance on faith and the importance of hospitality and community. Immediately following the holiday, Shemini Atzeret (sheh-MEE-nee aht-zeh-RET) and Simchat Torah (seem-KHAHT toh-RAH) are observed.



Customs

- Building and eating meals in a **sukkah** (SOO-kah), a temporary outdoor structure, symbolizing the shelters used during the Israelites journey—some people may sleep in the sukkah, too.
- Shaking the **four species** during prayers—a palm branch (lulav; loo-LAHV), willow and myrtle branches and citron (etrog; et-ROHG).
- **Invitations to guests** are common, reflecting the holiday's emphasis on hospitality.



Cultural Considerations

- It is a joyful and celebratory holiday.
- Work and/or school may be taken off, particularly for the first two days, as well as the two days immediately after for Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah.

How to Participate

- Wish someone a **Happy Sukkot**.
- **Accept an invitation to a sukkah**—many families, synagogues and community organizations welcome guests to share a meal in a sukkah.
- Attend the **Chicago Sukkah Design Festival** in North Lawndale, sponsored by JUF's JCRC.

Chanukah

חנוכה

The Festival of Lights

Late November/December

Chanukah (KHAH-noo-kah) is an eight-day holiday that commemorates the Maccabees' victory over oppression and the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. It celebrates the restoration of the Jewish people's ability to practice their faith freely. A central story of Chanukah is the miracle of a small amount of oil—enough for just one day—lasting for eight days in the Temple.



Customs



Each night, candles are lit on a nine-branched **menorah** (meh-NOR-ah), called a chanukiah (khah-noo-kee-AH), using a helper candle called the shamash. One candle is added each night until all eight are lit.



The traditional game of **dreidel** (DRAY-dull) is played with four-sided spinning top marked with Hebrew letters (nun, gimmel, hey, shin), representing the phrase, “A great miracle happened there.” Chocolate coins (gelt) are often used when playing.



While not a traditional part of the holiday, **gifts are exchanged**—especially in the U.S.—as Chanukah often falls during the broader December holiday season.

Symbolic Foods



Foods cooked in oil, such as potato pancakes (latkes; LAHT-kees) and jelly-filled doughnuts (sufganiyot; soof-gah-nee-YOHT), to honor the oil miracle.

Cultural Considerations

- Historically considered a minor religious holiday, its prominence has grown in the U.S. due to its timing near Christmas.
- It is a joyful holiday with no restrictions on work or daily activities.
- The name can be spelled in several ways (Chanukah, Hanukkah, etc.); all are considered acceptable.



How to Participate

- Wish someone a happy holiday by saying **Happy Chanukah** or **Chag Sameach** (KHAHG sah-MAY-ahkh).
- **Contribute to JUF's Chanukah Coat Club.**
Learn more at juf.org/Chanukah or scan the QR code.
- **Attend Local Celebrations**—many Jewish organizations host public menorah lightings and celebrations.



Scan the QR code to learn more about JUF's Chanukah Coat Club.

Purim

פורים

The Festival of Lots

Late February/March

Purim (POOR-im) is a joyous holiday that commemorates the courage of Queen Esther and the Jewish people's triumph over persecution in ancient Persia. As told in the Book of Esther, when Haman, an advisor to the king, plots to destroy the Jewish people, Queen Esther risks her life by revealing her hidden Jewish identity, ultimately foiling Haman's scheme and saving her people. The holiday's name is derived from the lots—a form of random selection—that Haman cast to determine the date of his planned attack.



Customs

- Reading the **Book of Esther**, or **Megillah** (meh-gih-LAH), in a community setting or synagogue.
- Wearing **costumes and masks**, representing the holiday's theme of hiddenness.
- Making **charitable donations** to support those in need.

Symbolic Foods



Hamentaschen (HAH-mahn-tah-shehn; triangular pastries) to represent the villainous Haman's hat (or ears), symbolizing his defeat.



Kreplach (KREP-lahkh; dumplings filled with meat often served in soup) to symbolize hiddenness.

Cultural Considerations

- Purim is a festive and celebratory holiday.
- Costumes and holiday-themed celebrations are common.

How to Participate

- Wish someone a **Happy Purim**.
- **Attend local celebrations**—many Jewish organizations host community carnivals, Megillah readings and food drives.

Passover/Pesach

חַג פֶּסַח

The Holiday of Freedom

Late March/April

Passover or Pesach (PAY-sahkh) is an eight-day holiday that commemorates the Israelite's liberation from slavery in ancient Egypt. Central to the story of Passover is Moses and the Ten Plagues, during which the Israelites were “passed over” and protected. Families and communities gather for a shared, ritual meal, where they retell the story of the Exodus and reflect on the themes of freedom, resilience and Jewish continuity.



Customs

- Jewish people attend a **Seder** (SAY-der; a festive, ritual meal) where participants retell the story of Passover and consume foods that symbolize the journey from slavery to freedom.
- **Abstinence from chametz** (khah-METS; leavened foods, such as bread, pasta or cake). Observant Jews thoroughly clean their homes, removing all chametz and burning it the day before Passover.

Symbolic Foods



Matzah (MAHT-zah; a flat, unleavened bread) to commemorate a hasty escape with no time for bread to rise.



Charoset (khah-ROH-set; a mix of apples, nuts and wine) to symbolize the mortar slaves used to build Pharaoh's structures.



Maror (mah-ROHR; bitter herbs) to symbolize the harshness of slavery.

Cultural Considerations

- Passover is one of the most widely observed Jewish holidays.
- Family and community gatherings play a significant role.
- Work and/or school may be taken off during portions of the holiday.

How to Participate

- Wish someone a **Happy Passover**.
- **Be mindful of food limitations** for events and have kosher for Passover food available.
- **Attend local celebrations**—many Jewish organizations host community seders and other celebratory events.

Shavuot

שבועות

The Celebration of Torah

Late May/Early June

Shavuot (shah-voo-OHT) is a two-day holiday that celebrates the Jewish people receiving the Torah and the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. It marks the culmination of the Israelites' journey from slavery in Egypt to spiritual freedom, as the teachings given would form the basis of Judaism.



Customs

- Attending synagogue services to hear the **reading of the Ten Commandments**.
- Participating in **Torah study** and learning—sometimes all night—known as **Tikkun Leil Shavuot** (tee-KOON layl shah-voo-OHT).
- **Decorating with greenery** to symbolize the onset of summer.

Symbolic Foods



Dairy to represent the inability to prepare kosher meat immediately after receiving the Torah.



Dairy Desserts (such as cheesecake or blintzes) to symbolize a land flowing with milk and honey.

Cultural Considerations

- Learning and community gatherings play a significant role.
- Work and/or school may be taken off.

How to Participate

- Wish someone a happy holiday by saying **Chag Sameach** (KHAHG sah-MAY-ahkh).
- **Attend local programming**—many Jewish organizations host community gatherings and study sessions.

Shabbat

שבת

The Day of Rest

Weekly from Sunset Friday to Sunset Saturday

Shabbat (shah-BAHT) is the weekly Jewish day of rest, also known as the Sabbath. The observance commemorates the story of creation and rest on the seventh day. It's a day dedicated to reflection, prayer, family and community.



Customs

- **Lighting Shabbat candles** and reciting the prayer.
- Attending or hosting a **Shabbat dinner** with family and friends.
- **Reciting the blessings** over the wine, known as the **Kiddush** (KIH-doosh), and challah bread, known as the **HaMotzi** (hah-moh-TSEE).
- Attending synagogue services.
- Refraining from work and other activities.

Symbolic Foods



Wine or **grape juice** to sanctify and celebrate the day.



Challah (KHAH-lah; braided bread) to symbolize sustenance.

Cultural Considerations

- Family, prayer and community gatherings play a significant role.
- Some individuals will refrain from work, travel, technology use and other activities.

How to Participate

- Wish someone a peaceful Sabbath by saying **Shabbat Shalom** (sha-BAHT shah-LOHM).
- **Accept an invitation to a Shabbat dinner**—many families, synagogues and community organizations welcome guests to share a Shabbat meal and learn about Jewish traditions.

Additional Holidays & Observances



Shemini Atzeret | Jewish Holiday

Late September or October

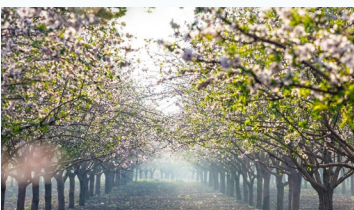
Shemini Atzeret (sheh-MEE-nee aht-zeh-RET) is the spiritual conclusion of Sukkot, taking place the following day. Customs include reciting the Yizkor (YEEZ-kor) memorial prayer and the Tefillat Geshem (teh-fee-LAHT GEH-shem), the prayer for winter rain. Work and/or school may be taken off.



Simchat Torah | Jewish Holiday

Late September or October

Simchat Torah (seem-KHAHT to-RAH), meaning “rejoicing in the Torah,” celebrates the completion and immediate restart of the annual Torah-reading cycle. Customs include reading the last and first verses of the Torah and Hakafot (hah-kah-FOHT), dancing and singing with the Torah. It takes place immediately following Shemini Atzeret, and work and/or school may be taken off.



Tu B'Shvat | Jewish Observance

Late January or February

Tu B'Shvat (too bih-SHVAHT) is the new year for trees and celebrates trees and nature. Customs include eating traditional fruits and nuts, planting trees and having a seder.



Yom HaShoah | Israeli Observance*

April or early May

Yom HaShoah (YOHM hah-shoh-AH) is Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Day, honoring the six million Jews murdered by Nazi Germany and remembering Jewish resistance fighters.



Yom HaZikaron | Israeli Observance*

Late April or early May

Yom HaZikaron (YOHM ha-zee-kah-ROHN) is Israel's Memorial Day, honoring fallen soldiers and victims of terrorism.



Yom HaAtzmaut | Israeli Holiday*

Late April or early May

Yom HaAtzmaut is Israel's Independence Day, celebrating the founding of the modern state in 1948.



Tisha B'Av | Jewish Observance

Late July or August

Tisha B'Av is the saddest day on the Jewish calendar. It marks the destruction of both Holy Temples in Jerusalem and other historic tragedies. Customs include fasting, reading the Book of Lamentations and restricting joyful activities and Torah study (except for mournful portions).



Lag B'Omer | Jewish Observance

May

Lag B'Omer (lahg boh-OH-mer) is a joyous break in an otherwise semi-mourning period between Passover and Shavuot, called Counting the Omer (OH-mer). Lag B'Omer celebrates the end of a historic plague and the life of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a great scholar credited in writing the Zohar (zoh-HAHR) or Kabbalah (kah-bah-LAH). Customs include bonfires and outdoor celebrations.



Tu B'Av | Jewish Holiday

Late July or August

Tu B'Av (too beh-AV), often called the "Jewish Valentine's Day," is a minor holiday that celebrates love, joy and renewal, as well as marks a time of ancient matchmaking and the end of the grape harvest. Customs include music, dancing and romantic gestures, including weddings, proposals and gift giving.

Asterisk () denotes non-Jewish, Israeli holiday/observance that some Jewish people observe.*

Jewish Holidays & Observances

Note: All holidays and observances begin at sundown the evening before the dates that are listed.

Holiday	2026–2027	2027–2028	2028–2029	2029–2030	2030–2031
Rosh Hashanah	September 12–13, 2026	October 2–3, 2027	September 21–22, 2028	September 10–11, 2029	September 28–29, 2030
Yom Kippur	September 21, 2026	October 11, 2027	September 30, 2028	September 19, 2029	October 7, 2030
Sukkot	September 26–October 2, 2026	October 16–22, 2027	October 5–11, 2028	September 24–30, 2029	October 12–18, 2030
Shemini Atzeret	October 3, 2026	October 23, 2027	October 12, 2028	October 1, 2029	October 19, 2030
Simchat Torah	October 4, 2026	October 24, 2027	October 13, 2028	October 2, 2029	October 20, 2030
Chanukah	December 5–12, 2026	December 25, 2027–January 1, 2028	December 13–20, 2028	December 2–9, 2029	December 21–28, 2030
Tu B'Shvat	January 23, 2027	February 12, 2028	January 31, 2029	January 19, 2030	February 8, 2031
Purim	March 23, 2027	March 12, 2028	March 1, 2029	March 19, 2030	March 9, 2031
Passover (Pesach)	April 22–29, 2027	April 11–18, 2028	March 31–April 7, 2029	April 18–25, 2030	April 8–15, 2031
Yom HaShoah*	May 4, 2027	April 24, 2028	April 12, 2029	April 30, 2030	April 21, 2031
Yom HaZikaron*	May 11, 2027	May 1, 2028	April 18, 2029	May 7, 2030	April 28, 2031
Yom HaAtzmaut*	May 12, 2027	May 2, 2028	April 19, 2029	May 8, 2030	April 29, 2031
Lag B'Omer	May 25, 2027	May 14, 2028	May 3, 2029	May 21, 2030	May 11, 2031
Shavuot	June 11–12, 2027	May 31–June 1, 2028	May 20–21, 2029	June 7–8, 2030	May 28–29, 2031
Tisha B'Av	August 12, 2027	August 1, 2028, 2028	July 22, 2029	August 8, 2030	July 29, 2031
Tu B'Av	August 18, 2027	August 7, 2028	July 27, 2029	August 14, 2030	August 4, 2031

Shabbat is observed every week from Friday evening to Saturday evening.

Bold denotes major Jewish holidays/observances.

Asterisk () denotes non-Jewish, Israeli holiday/observance that some Jewish people observe.*

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to make the world a better place — for everyone.**

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to Jewish life and values, fueling a dynamic, enduring
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