



An Introductory Guide to **JUDAISM, JEWISH TERMS & HOLIDAYS**

Jewish Agencies at Shalom Park, the greater Charlotte area, and nationally

ADL	Anti-Defamation League
AIPAC	The American Israel Public Affairs Committee
AJC	American Jewish Committee
APDI	AlPi Darko Institute
BBYO	B'nai Brith Youth Organization
CJP	Charlotte Jewish Preschool
Charlotte Torah Center	Charlotte Torah Center Orthodox Synagogue
CJDS	Charlotte Jewish Day School
CJE	Center for Jewish Education (Levine-Sklut Judaic Library & Blumenthal Educator Resource Center)
CJN	Charlotte Jewish News
CJP	Charlotte Jewish Preschool
CYJ	Camp Young Judea
CYJL	Create Your Jewish Legacy
FDF	Financial Disbursements Form
FJC	Foundation for Jewish Camp
FSP	Foundation of Shalom Park
GA	General Assembly
Hadassah	Women's Zionist Organization of America
Havurat Tikvah	A member of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation
HUC	Hebrew Union College
JAFI	Jewish Agency for Israel
JAHM	Jewish American Heritage Month
JCC	Jewish Community Center
JCC Association	Jewish Community Center Association of North America
JCRC	Jewish Community Relations Council
JDC	American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the "Joint")
JFGC	Jewish Federations of Greater Charlotte
JFNA	Jewish Federations of North America
JFS	Jewish Family Services
JINSA	Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (DC)
JNF	Jewish National Fund
JOFEE	Jewish Outdoor Food and Environmental Education
JPAN	Jewish Professional Advisors Network
JPS	The Jewish Preschool on Sardis
JTA	Jewish Telegraphic Agency
JTS	Jewish Theological Seminary of America
JVSCS	Jewish Vocational Services Career Services
JWEF	Jewish Women's Endowment Fund
NCSY	National Conference of Synagogue Youth (Orthodox Movement youth group)
NFTY	North American Federation of Temple Youth (Reform Movement youth group)
NYLC	National Young Leadership Cabinet
Ohr Ha Torah	Congregation Ohr Ha Torah, Charlotte
OU	Orthodox Union
SEED	Synagogue Education Excellence Directive
TBE	Temple Beth-El, Charlotte
Temple Kol Tikvah	Tempel Kol Tikvah, Lake Norman
TI	Temple Israel, Charlotte
URJ	Union for Reform Judaism
USCJ	United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism
USY	United Synagogue Youth (Conservative Movement Youth Group)
WP	Women's Philanthropy
YP	Young Professional
ZOA	Zionist Organization of America

Introduction to Judaism

Enhancing Jewish life sits at the heart of the Sandra and Leon Levine Jewish Community Center's mission: *enriching lives and building relationships through quality Jewish experiences*. Whatever your background with Judaism may be, by becoming a member or participating in our programs, you have made a conscious choice to involve yourself with a Jewish organization. As such, we want to help you gain what we call "Jewish confidence," some basic familiarity with Jewish culture, holidays, and tradition, so you can enrich your life and build quality relationships here at the J! In every department, there are opportunities to participate in, support, or be exposed to Jewish life at the LJCC. This guide is meant to be a useful reference guide for you. Perhaps the information is already familiar, perhaps it will be a refresher, or perhaps you'll learn something new..

What is Judaism?

Judaism is 3,000 years old and is the world's oldest monotheistic religion. Monotheism means belief in one God. Jewish teachings encourage compassionate and ethical behavior as a primary way to express what God wants from humanity, as God has no form or physical representation. Yet Judaism is more than a religion. Jewish tradition values questioning, debating, and wrestling with ideas. It is a civilization with its own unique culture, sometimes described as a tribe, a family, or a people. Judaism has its own art, music, poetry, language, food, and celebrations. You might sometimes hear people say that they are culturally Jewish, but not religious. The JCC movement tries to support people enjoying a range of Jewish cultural experiences, which sometimes does include spiritual practice. It's all connected, but each person can find their own way into relationship with Judaism. (There's a classic Jewish joke that sums it up: Joe goes to synagogue to talk to God, and Sam goes to synagogue to talk to Joe!)

Denominations (or Movements) in Judaism

There are several branches of Judaism that share the same fundamental beliefs and differ mainly in their degree of observance of halachah (Jewish religious law). Orthodox Judaism is the most traditional or strict denomination which may include specific gender roles, a literalist view of the Torah, and rigid Shabbat observance. The Reform movement is the most liberal branch of Judaism, with a focus on finding personal meaning in the tradition rather than upholding observance. Reform services integrate English readings into the prayers and is considered most accommodating of non-Jewish family members. Conservative Judaism is best described as "conserving" the tradition and blending it with current-day modernity, with observance somewhere between Orthodox and Reform. As compared to the Conservative, Orthodox and Reform movements which have European roots, the Renewal and Reconstructionist movements were both created in modern America and focus on spiritual connection and peoplehood, respectively, as their primary frameworks.

Israel and Jewish History

Israel is the name and location of the ancient Jewish homeland since 1100 BCE and was reestablished as a Jewish state in 1948. Jews pray facing Israel, and Israel is considered a sacred place. Moving to Israel is called making aliyah, or "going up" to the land. Israel now has approximately 7 million Jewish residents, which is half the world's Jewish population. Israelis often retain a connection to their ethnic origins in addition to allegiance to their country. (For example, Moroccan Jews have a specific cultural heritage, although they made aliyah largely between 1948 and 2016.) The JCC movement focuses on creating a love of Israel among the community, celebrating its people, culture and heritage through speakers, cultural events, Israeli dancing, food, and community-building for Israelis living in our area.

How is Judaism Different from Christianity?

Jesus is not part of Jewish teaching; therefore, Jews do not consider him to be the Messiah, or celebrate holidays that commemorate his life such as Christmas or Easter. Jewish tradition expresses a hope of a messianic age as expressed by the creation of a healed society but does not believe that the Messiah has arrived yet. There is no concept of original sin in Judaism (i.e., Judaism doesn't teach that people are born sinful and need a certain belief or religion to save them). Judaism does not allow evangelizing in any form but welcomes those who decide on their own to join the Jewish people. Jews believe all people are equally created in the image of God – in Hebrew, B'Tzelem Elohim – and do not need a spiritual intermediary to facilitate a connection to the divine.

Basic Jewish Vocabulary

Here are some words you might hear around the LJCC. A note about pronunciation: The “ch” in Hebrew words (challah, halachah, chai, Chanukah) is not pronounced like the “ch” in child; rather it’s a guttural, throaty sound—like the “ch” in Johann Bach—which does not have an English equivalent. The letter “H” is the closest, but it’s not really it.

Bar Mitzvah/Bat Mitzvah – translated as “Son/ Daughter of the Commandments.” Jewish coming-of-age ceremony. Takes place at age 13 for boys, and at age 12 or 13 for girls. Typically the Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah child leads part of the Shabbat service at the synagogue on Friday or Saturday, followed by a big party for family and friends. Often includes a Mitzvah Project, or social action project.

Chag Sameach – A greeting, Happy Holiday! Can be used on most holidays, by inserting the holiday name in between the words, such as “Chag Sukkot Sameach.”

Chai – A Hebrew word meaning “life.” This word spelled out in Hebrew letters has become a common symbol on necklaces, jewelry and other ornaments. Gifts to charity are routinely given in multiples of 18, because 18 is the numeric value of the letters in the word Chai. The typical Jewish toast is l’chayim (to “life”).

Challah – A braided bread that Jews eat on Shabbat and on some other holidays. It is inspired by the show-bread prepared by ancient Israelites, and has gotten larger, sweeter, and more ornate in America.

Havdalah – The short ceremony of separation between Shabbat and the new week. A braided candle, spicebox, and cup of wine each symbolize an aspect of the transition. Takes place Saturday night when three stars appear.

Kippah (key-PAH) **or Yarmulke** (YAH-mu-kah) – Synonyms for a skullcap or other head covering. Worn as a sign of respect for God. Some people wear these all the times, others only in synagogue or on religious occasions. In Orthodox Judaism, this is only worn by men.

Kosher – Kosher food is food that adheres to Jewish dietary laws, called Kashrut. The main categories of Kashrut include refraining from pork or shellfish, not mixing meat and milk products, and ensuring that meat is slaughtered in a humane way. Please refer to the Foundation of Shalom Park’s Kashrut Policy for more details and be sure to follow the policy guidelines when planning any food-related activities or programs.

Magen David (Mah-GEN Dah-VEED) – Shield or Star of King David (the third king of ancient Israel) is the universally recognized symbol of Jewry and appears on the flag of the State of Israel. It gained popularity when it was adopted as the emblem of the Zionist movement in 1897.

Mazal Tov (MAH-zul TOVE) – A greeting of “congratulations” or literally, good fortune.

Mezuzah (M’zoo-za) – A small case attached to the doorposts of traditional Jewish homes and community institutions. Inside this decorative box is a small piece of parchment with verses from the Torah written on it, specifically Deuteronomy 6:4-9, a passage commonly known to Jews as the Shema.

Mitzvah (MITZ-va or meetz-VAH) – A religious commandment. There are 613 official commandments in the Torah, but the word can also be used to mean “a good deed” or helpful act. Plural is mitzvot.

Rabbi – Jewish religious leader (similar to a minister or pastor), from the Hebrew word for Teacher. A rabbi might work as an organizational leader, an educator, or a congregational clergy person. The earliest rabbis were the leaders of the Jewish community in both the Land of Israel and the Babylonian Exile, whose written works are the core teachings of Rabbinic Judaism (such as the Mishnah and the Talmud).

Shabbat (Shah-BAT, sometimes SHA-bus) – The Jewish Sabbath, occurring every week from Friday sundown to nightfall Saturday. A day to rest, refresh, connect with family and community. Jews have a wide range of ritual observances on Shabbat. The timing of Shabbat’s beginning and ending is dependent on the seasons and the sunlight.

Shalom – Peace. Used as the main Hebrew greeting for Hello or Goodbye.

Synagogue – A Jewish house of worship and community. Some Jews use the word “temple” instead, and others use the Yiddish word “shul” (pronounced shool).

Torah – The first 5 books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), often called the “5 Books of Moses,” known as Judaism’s most important holy and primary text. The Jewish Bible consists of the Torah, the books of the Prophets, and additional writings. It’s what Christians call the Old Testament, but Jews do not use this term.

A Guide to the Jewish Holidays

The Jewish calendar provides many opportunities to celebrate Jewish life with rituals in the home as well as in the synagogue. This document is meant to serve as a basic overview, giving some background and insight into the Jewish holidays, their meaning, and their observance. Holiday schedules will always be posted on our website and social media.

THE JEWISH CALENDAR

The Jewish calendar is luni-solar. The moon's cycle determines the months, but the sun's cycle determines the year. Therefore, a Jewish year (including leap years, which add an entire month) can have from 50 to 55 weeks. This was done to ensure Passover always occurred in the spring.

WHEN DO JEWISH HOLIDAYS START?

The Jewish day begins at sunset in response to the verse, "...and there was evening and there was day..." repeated in the Biblical creation story. All Jewish holidays begin in the evening. So, if your calendar says Passover begins on April 24, it means families will be gathering for Passover dinner the night of April 23. A few secular calendars mark the preceding day as "Erev Passover," which means Passover Eve. If your calendar says "Erev" or "Eve" before a holiday name, it means the holiday starts the evening of that day and continues into the next day.

WHEN DO JEWISH HOLIDAYS END?

All Jewish holidays end at sunset. There are differences in the number of days holidays are observed, though. Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot, the three pilgrimage festivals (see below), are observed for an extra day in Conservative and Orthodox communities outside of Israel.

Shabbat

Shabbat, or the Sabbath, is the most important Jewish holiday because it occurs the most frequently. It is the only holiday included in the Ten Commandments. Shabbat, which occurs every seventh day, is the only Jewish holiday not linked to any historical event (like Chanukkah) or to a natural cycle like a lunar month, or season of the year (like the three pilgrimage festivals). The word "Shabbat" comes from the root *Shin-Beit-Tav*, meaning to cease, to end, or to rest. Jewish thought has always described Shabbat as primarily a day of rest and spiritual enrichment.

Shabbat is the day we shift from acting upon the world to creating balance in the world. Shabbat is supposed to be a "taste" of the world-to-come, an ideal state where nothing is created and nothing is destroyed. That is the primary purpose of the numerous and often confusing "do's and don'ts" of Jewish law regarding Shabbat; they are designed to help make Shabbat a day to "stop and smell the roses" and to find spiritual uplift in the world and people around us. They are based on the commandments to both remember and safeguard the Sabbath. That is why everything about Shabbat is expanded and elevated: nicer clothes, more elaborate meals, and an expanded liturgy in the synagogue.

Primary Shabbat rituals and symbols include lighting two candles to welcome Shabbat, blessing your children, reciting *Kiddush*, a blessing over wine, including two braided loaves of bread, called *challah*, at the Shabbat meal, singing Shabbat songs at the table, and ending Shabbat with a special ceremony called *havdalah*, which means separation.

Shabbat was a radically egalitarian idea in the ancient world. Leisure time and reflection was for the wealthy and the ruling classes only, never for the serving or laboring classes.

Shalosh R'galim: The Three Pilgrimage Holidays

Biblical worship required offering sacrifices. The Torah commands the Israelites to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the site of the *Beit Hamikdash*, The Temple, and offer a variety of sacrifices: a portion of the first fruits of your trees, the first-born of your livestock, or a portion of your grain harvest. Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot are the *shalosh r'galim*, the three pilgrimage festivals.

Passover

Pesach, or Passover, commemorates the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and is considered the beginning of the Jewish holiday calendar. (If you've seen DreamWorks' "The Prince of Egypt," then you know the story of Passover.) It is called *z'man cheiruteinu*, the time of our freedom.

Passover is celebrated for seven or eight days (depending on your branch of Judaism or if you live in Israel or not) starting on the 14th of Nisan, which usually falls in the middle of April. (Christianity's Last Supper is believed to be a Passover seder, which is why Passover and Easter usually occur close together).

Matzah, an unleavened cracker-type of bread, is the primary Passover symbol. It represents the haste with which the Israelites left Egypt: they didn't have time for their dough to rise. *Chametz*, or leaven, is forbidden on Passover; families observing this Jewish law spend a lot of time before Passover *kashering*, or making the house and utensils ready for Passover.

The Passover *seder* is the primary holiday ritual. *Seder* means order, and the *seder* is a structured meal in which every element helps tell the story of the exodus. The first and last days of Passover are *chagim*, holidays, and Jewish law prohibits work on those days (two days in each case for some branches of Judaism and for Jews living outside of Israel). The days in between are called *chol hamoed*, the intermediate days of the occasion. Work is permitted, but *chametz* is still forbidden. Remember that Passover, like all Jewish holidays, begins the evening before the date that it appears on your calendar. If your calendar says that Passover starts on April 24, then Passover really begins with the *seder* the night of April 23.

Shavuot

Shavuot (Hebrew for weeks, sometimes referred to in English as Pentacost) always occurs seven weeks after Passover.

In the Torah Shavuot celebrates the spring barley harvest when *bikkurim*, or first fruit offerings, were brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. After the destruction of the Temple, the focus of the holiday shifted to the revelation of the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

Today, Shavuot is called *z'man matan torateinu*, the time of the giving of the Torah. Shavu'ot is observed for one or two days, depending on the branch of Judaism and if you live outside of Israel. Shavuot is celebrated with dairy meals and all-night study of Torah.

Sukkot

Sukkot, or booths (sometimes referred to in English as Tabernacles) occurs five days after Yom Kippur. In the Torah, Sukkot celebrates the fall harvest, from which offerings were brought to the Temple in Jerusalem.

After the destruction of the Temple the focus of the holiday shifted to commemorate the huts the Israelites lived in while wandering in the desert.

Sukkot is called *z'man simchateinu*, the time of our joy, and was the most important holiday in rabbinic times. The *sukkah*, a temporary shelter, and the *lulav* and *etrog* are the primary symbols of Sukkot. Sukkot lasts for seven days, and like Passover, the first and last days are *chagim*, holidays, on which work is prohibited.

Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah

Shemini Atzeret (Eighth Day of Occasion) and *Simchat Torah* (Rejoicing in the Law) immediately follow Sukkot. In Israel, and in some branches of Judaism, they are celebrated as one day. Shemini Atzeret is an extra day added onto the end of Sukkot, as if we do not want to say farewell to the holiday. Simchat Torah celebrates the completion of the annual cycle of Torah readings.

Simchat Torah is celebrated by dancing with the Torah, and by returning to the beginning of the Torah immediately upon its completion.

Yamim Nora-im: The Days of Awe

Rosh Hashana

Rosh Hashana means head of the year and introduces *aseret y'mei t'shuva*, the ten days of repentance, which connect Rosh Hashana to *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. These two holidays are referred to as *yamim nora-im*, the Days of Awe, and are also often called the High Holidays. In many synagogues, the decorative Torah mantels and covers for the prayer table are switched out for covers of plain white, symbolizing purity and equality before God.

Rosh Hashana is called *yom t'ruah* in the Torah, a day of (shofar) blasts, and the central synagogue ritual is blowing the *shofar*, or ram's horn, to signal the new year. Honey is served at meals to symbolize the hope for a sweet year. All forms of work are prohibited on Rosh Hashana.

Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur is the Jewish Day of Atonement. It occurs on the tenth day of the Jewish month of Tishrei. The Torah refers to Yom Kippur as *Shabbat shabbaton*, a Sabbath of Sabbaths, indicating the extreme sanctity of the day. A special set of prayers, called *slichot*, or penitential prayers, are added to each prayer service, allowing the individual to ask forgiveness for any transgressions in the previous year. (During *aseret y'mei t'shuvah*, it is a Jewish custom to ask forgiveness from the people around you for any offense you may have committed against them). All work is prohibited on Yom Kippur, as is eating or drinking (Yom Kippur is one of two full-day fasts in the Jewish calendar). These customs help you withdraw from the world to make space for reflection and introspection. The day concludes with a single shofar blast.

The Minor Holidays

Hanukkah

Hanukkah (sometimes spelled Chanukah) means dedication, and is also called *chag ha-urim*, the festival of lights. It commemorates the victory by a small group of Jews (led by the Maccabees) over the mighty Selucid Greeks in 168 BCE and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem. The primary ritual is lighting candles for eight nights in commemoration of the eight days it took to dedicate the Temple. Additionally, fried foods are eaten in commemoration of the oil that burned for eight days. Historically, only *gelt*, or money, was given as a gift. Contemporary customs of gift giving are influenced by Hanukkah's proximity to Christmas. Hanukkah is not mentioned in the Torah so it does not have the same status as the three pilgrimage holidays. Work is permitted.

Tu b'Shvat

Tu b'Shvat means the 15th day of Sh'vat and was the date used for calculating when trees had matured enough to use their fruits, which meant bringing some to the Temple as an offering. In modern time, it became known as Jewish Arbor Day and was celebrated by planting trees in Israel. More recently, it has become a day for Jewish environmental activism. There are no work restrictions on Tu b'Shvat.

Purim

Purim means lots, as in lottery. It celebrates the rescue of Persian Jews from the evil Haman, an advisor to King Ahashveros, who was bent on their destruction. It often has the raucous feel of a Mardi Gras celebration; people dress up in costume to highlight the theme of inner and outer identities in the holiday story. There are four central rituals: reading the *megillah*, or scroll of Esther, that tells the Purim story; giving charity to the poor (so they will have money to buy goods for Passover); giving "treats" to your friends; and having a festive meal in honor of the holiday. One of the symbols of the holiday is the *hamenstasch*, a triangle-shaped cookie, which symbolizes Hamen's ears (or pockets). It is a festive day and there are no prohibitions on work.

Yom HaShoah v'Hagvurah

Yom HaShoah v'Hagvurah means Holocaust and Heroism Day. It falls midway between Passover and Israel Independence Day. A primary ritual is lighting a *yahrzeit* candle, or memorial candle and reciting memorial prayers. Many synagogues and JCCs hold public ceremonies during which six candles are lit in memory of the six million Jews who perished in the Shoah.

Yom HaZikaron and Yom Ha'Atzmaut:

Yom HaZikaron means Memorial Day and is celebrated in Israel the day before *Yom HaAtzmaut*, Israel's Independence Day. It commemorates all who have died in Israel's wars and from terrorist attacks. In Israel, the day begins with a siren at sunset, and there are multiple ceremonies in every community. The following morning, another siren causes a complete pause in activity (people stop their cars and get out to stand by them). It is a somber day of reflection on the price Israel has paid to maintain its existence; almost every Israeli family has reason to visit a cemetery on Yom HaZikaron.

The day leads straight into Independence Day, which celebrates the end of the British Mandate and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Cities in North America with large Jewish populations often have parades for Israeli Independence Day.

Lag b'Omer

Lag b'Omer means the 33rd day of the omer, a period of 49 days between Passover and Shavuot. This is a semi-mourning period, commemorating a plague that killed thousands of students of the great Rabbi Akiva. According to medieval tradition, the plague stopped on Lag b'Omer, so it became a day of celebration: weddings could take place and people would get their hair cut. In Israel it is celebrated with bonfires.

Yom Yerushalayim

Yom Yerushalayim means Jerusalem Day and is observed in Israel to celebrate Israel's victory in 1967, which resulted in its regaining sovereignty over all of Jerusalem.

Tisha b'Av

Tisha b'Av, means the ninth of Av. It commemorates the destruction of both the first and second Temples, tragedies that changed Jewish life forever. Jewish custom has assigned other tragic events to that day. It is considered the saddest day in the Jewish calendar and is observed by reading from the book of Lamentations, fasting, and refraining from joyful activities, which includes Torah study. There is no prohibition on work, but a person fasting may not be able to work as usual. In recognition of the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and regaining sovereignty over Jerusalem in 1967, many Jews fast for only a half day, rather than a full day.

Minor Fasts

There are five other minor fast days scheduled at various times of the year, which are observed only from sunrise to sunset. No accommodations are usually needed, other than sensitivity for the fact that they are not eating, for Jews who observe these fasts.

The Jewish Holidays in Time

Here is a list of the Jewish holidays as they typically fall in the Gregorian calendar:

September/October > Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah

December > Hanukkah

January > Tu b'Shvat

February/March > Purim

March/April > Passover

April/May > Yom HaShoah, Yom HaZikaron, Yom Ha'Atzmaut

May > Lag b'Omer, Yom Yerushalayim

May/June > Shavuot

July/August > Tisha b'Av