

JEWISH LITERACY
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The Hebrew Calendar and Cycle of Holidays & Shabbat

1. **The Hebrew Calendar**

- a) Philosophy: Judaism is a way of life and the calendar with its cycles is a guide to the religious and spiritual life. The central paradigm of Judaism is redemption.
- b) Days begin at sunset
- c) Ours is a lunar calendar and months begin at the new moon (Oct. 21, 2017 is *Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan*). This results in the need for leap months.
 - i) 29.5 days mean a 12 month year that is 354 days long.
 - ii) The Torah says that Passover is on the 15th of Nissan and is in the spring.
 - iii) Thus we have an extra month 7 times every 19 years (years 3,6,8,11,14,17,19). Divide year by 19 and the remainder is the year of the cycle ($5770/19=304 R2 >$ we are in the 2nd year of the cycle and will not have an extra month this year).
 - iv) There are 54 Torah portions. In regular years, we read double portions.
 - v) Creation is the year 1. Only Judaism reckons from the birth of humanity not the birth of its religion.
 - vi) This is why holidays come earlier and later. In 2017 (5778), Rosh Hashanah day was Sept. 21, Yom Kippur was Sept. 30, and Chanukah will be Dec. 13
 - a) Next year, RH= 9/10/18; YK=9/19; Chanukah= 12/3
 - b) In 5780; RH=9/30/19; YK=10/9/19; Chanukah= 12/23
- d) The double days of the holidays due to the uncertainty of the date of the new moon. In Israel, only Rosh Hashanah is celebrated a second day.
- e) The months are: *Nisan, Sivan, Tammuz, Av, Elul, Tishrei, Cheshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat, Adar (I & II)*

2. **The Holidays: Deeper Meanings**

- a) ***Rosh Chodesh***: Celebration of the new moon & new month. It is being revived as a women's holiday.
- b) ***Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur & the 10 Days of Awe***
 - i) RH not identified in the Bible as New Year's Day (in fact, it's in the 7th month).
 - ii) A time for introspection.
 - iii) Image of being on trial for your life. "On RH it is written, on YK it is sealed."
 - iv) The fast is a way of tasting death.
 - v) Focus is on confession of sin and teshuvah – "where a *baal teshuvah* stands, a *tzadik* cannot."
 - vi) The solemn period actually begins back in July with Tisha B'Av.
- c) ***Sukkot***
 - i) Joyful holiday immediately following the solemnity of the HHD
 - ii) Living in booths to commemorate the 40 years wandering and the need to live in huts during the harvest.
 - iii) The booths are a reminder of the fragility of life itself.
 - iv) Biblical reading is the Book of Ecclesiastes.
 - v) On the last day of Sukkot, we pray for rain (now that the rainy season has begun).
 - vi) Most important holiday in biblical times.
- d) ***Simchat Torah***
 - i) End and beginning of Torah reading.
 - ii) Symbol - our study of Torah never ends.

- e) **Chanukah**
- i) Story - 167 BCE - Syrian/Greek rulers who would destroy Judaism.
 - ii) Chanukah means “dedication.”
 - iii) Without Chanukah, there would be no Christmas (Judaism would have ended some 160 years before the birth of Jesus). And with out Christianity we would know little about Chanukah (because the Church preserved the Book of Maccabees).
 - iv) Menorah - 8 candles + *shammes*. Place from right to left and light from left to right. Menorah should be seen (as from a window).
 - v) *Latkes & sufganiot* (jelly doughnuts) – for the oil
 - vi) Dreidle: Has the letters for the words *nes gadol haya sham* (“a great miracle happened there” – in Israel, *nes gadol haya po*, “a great miracle happened here”). How to play: Nun (get none), gimel (take all), hay (get half), shin (put one in).
 - vii) Deeper meanings
 - a) You have enough
 - b) What was impure can be made pure.
 - c) Note that we don’t celebrate the original dedication of the Temple, only it’s re-dedication that we observe.
- f) **Purim**
- i) Story of Haman, Ahasuerus, Mordecai and Esther in Persia.
 - ii) Name refers to the lots used to select the day of execution.
 - iii) Deeper meaning: no matter how good you have it in the diaspora – even if a Jew can become queen – at the whim of a government official, all Jews can face death. We are never safe in the diaspora.
 - iv) Another lesson – never write off assimilated Jews like Esther and Mordecai
 - v) Another lesson – whosoever would be God must destroy the Jews totally!
- g) **Passover**
- i) 8 day holiday commemorating the Exodus.
 - ii) Must eat matzah and cannot eat *chometz*.
 - iii) *Haggadah* read – it does not contain mention of Moses (concern that Moses would be worshipped as God).
 - iv) 90% of Jews attend a Seder (the word means “order”)
 - v) Deeper meaning – live as though you were personally freed from Egypt. Examine you life to see what you are slave to.
- h) **Shavuot**
- i) Means “weeks” – we count the days from Pesach to Shavuot (the counting of the Omer)
 - ii) Celebrates the receipt of the Torah on Sinai.
 - a) This is the reason for the freedom gained at Pesach
 - b) Every time Moses says “let my people go” he adds “to worship God”
 - iii) God binds Himself to Law – the universe can be understood.
 - iv) Also celebrate the first harvest.
 - v) Read the book of Ruth (themes of faith and harvest).
 - vi) Tradition of *siyum leil Shavout* – an (almost) all night Torah study session.
- i) **Modern Holidays**
- i) *Yom Hashoah*
 - ii) *Yom Hazikaron* – Israel Memorial Day – the day before Independence Day.
 - iii) *Yom Ha’atsma’ut* – Israel Independence Day
 - a) Ben-Gurion: “In Israel, if you do not believe in miracles, you are not a realist.”

Shabbat

- I. **Shabbat in Overview:** “More than Israel has kept the Shabbat, the Shabbat has kept Israel.” Of all of creation, God calls only the Shabbat holy. It’s the first thing holy in the Torah and the only thing holy in the 10 Commandments. The Shabbat is the only thing in the creation story that is wholly new to the world.
- A. Two reasons given in the Torah for Shabbat – on the 7th day, God rested and to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt.
 - B. All Jews agree that Shabbat is a time for spiritual refreshment. That we should do something to reflect the holiness of the day. There is a wide variation on what should be done. It is a reminder not to let the need to make a living make us blind to the need for living.
 - C. Shabbat is a day in which we pretend we have achieved the redemption of the world. [Handbook, pg. 120 – Labors prohibited on Shabbat]
 - 1. We don’t do anything classified as work because there’s nothing to do!
 - 2. The Shabbat as a bride – *Lecha Dodi*.
 - 3. We don’t do anything that effects creation because creation is complete.
 - 4. It’s as though we pause in our painting to view the painting.
 - 5. We dress in our best clothes, sing songs, relax with family, study Torah.
 - 6. We try to help unify God’s male and female aspects in heaven by being one on earth. This is why sex is a double mitzvah on Friday night.
 - 7. Tradition that you have an extra soul on the Shabbat. When this extra soul returns to heaven, God asks what it has learned in this world. Woe to the soul that has not had the opportunity to study.
 - D. Ethics is the way to serve God, ritual is the way to connect with God. Shabbat combines the two.
 - E. Gefilte fish – so you don’t have to separate the bones on Shabbat.
 - F. Havdalah – the separation back into the world of the profane.
- II. **Observance** [Handbook, pg. 236: Preparing for Shabbat]
- A. Friday Night
 - 1. Set a special table, flowers, good dishes, dress up, etc.
 - 2. Invite guests, if possible
 - 3. Mitzvah of tzedakah
 - 4. Start with candle lighting (traditionally, 18 minutes before sunset). Two candles for the two words, *zachor/remember* and *shamor/guard*. Light candles first then say b’racha . [Handbook, pg. 49]
 - 5. Family blessing.
 - 6. Kiddush on the wine [Handbook, pg. 52]
 - 7. *Motzi* on the challah. Challah is covered so it won’t be jealous about the blessing on the wine. Custom of silence between the motzi and eating the bread. [Handbook, pg. 29]
 - 8. The meal and blessing after the meal.

- B. *Erev Shabbat* in the Synagogue
 1. Orthodox – before dinner.
 2. Conservative/Reform – after dinner. In many Reform congregations, this is the main Sabbath worship service with the Torah reading. More traditional congregations read Torah only on Shabbat morning.
 3. Oneg Shabbat: Sabbath joy.
- C. Shabbat Day [Handbook, pg. 427 for ideas on Shabbat observance]
 1. Observance – from the traditional to the Reform.
 2. The principle is to make the day different and sacred and holy. A key is to avoid changing the world.
 3. You should decide what you will do and not do. This may change over time. This is the beginning of spiritual discipline.
 4. Don't adopt an "all or nothing at all" approach
 5. Services and Torah study.
- D. *Havdalah* (means "separation") - [Handbook, pg. 57 & pg. 424]
 1. Blessing for wine, spices (we smell them to try to hold on to the sweetness of Shabbat spirit), light, separation.
 2. Conclude by extinguishing the light in the wine.
 3. Sing "*Eliyahu Ha-navi*" and "*Shavuah Tov*"
 4. Traditionally done when there are three stars in the sky – but flexibility is OK.

III. Some Quotes from Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Sabbath*

- A. "There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord." (pg. 3)
- B. "There is happiness in the love of labor, there is misery in the love of gain." (pg. 3)
- C. "The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments." (pg. 6)
- D. "Judaism is a *religion of time* aiming at *the sanctification of time*." (pg. 8)
- E. "The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to *holiness in time*. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world."
- F. "Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self." (pg. 14)
- G. "Just as creation began with the word, 'Let there be light!' so does the celebration of creation begin with the kindling of lights." (pg. 66)
- H. "We share time, we own space. Through my ownership of space, I am a rival of all other beings; through my living in time, I am a contemporary of all other beings." (pg. 99)
- I. "Time is God's gift to the world of space." (pg. 100)

Remember: Don't let the best be the enemy of the good. Start observing Shabbat in some way and then let your soul be your guide.