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Jewish Holidays: Fact Sheet

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Introduction

Judaism is one of the three major Abrahamic faiths, alongside Islam and Christianity. Many traditions and variations of Judaism are practiced in the United States, including cultural and religious variations. According to the Pew Research Center, about 2.2% of Americans (6.7 million people) self-identify as religiously or culturally Jewish. Roughly 22% of American Jews describe themselves as culturally, but not religiously, Jewish.¹

This fact sheet highlights four major cultural and religious holidays (Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Hanukkah) observed by a significant portion of Jewish American populations and addresses some of the ways that these holidays have been recognized by elected officials. It does not include national holidays recognizing modern Israeli history.

This fact sheet is designed to assist congressional offices with work related to Jewish holidays. It contains sample speeches and remarks from the *Congressional Record*, presidential proclamations and remarks, and selected historical and cultural resources.

This is part of a series of Congressional Research Service fact sheets on religious holidays in the United States.

Determining Dates of Holidays

The traditional Jewish calendar is based on a lunisolar calendar, with 354 days, adjusted every few years.² This means that while Jewish holidays are observed on the same date every year according to the Jewish calendar, these dates vary on the Gregorian calendar.

Major Holidays and Observances

By and large, official government observance of Jewish holidays is determined at the local level. For example, some school districts close schools or allow students to take excused absences to observe certain Jewish holidays. In some Jewish communities, work is forbidden on specific holidays, including Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and certain days of Passover. These provisions against work are similar to the prohibitions against working on the Sabbath.

Owing to the long history and great diversity within Jewish communities, the observance of these holidays can vary widely.

Passover

Passover is generally observed in April in the Gregorian calendar. It commemorates the Israelites' emancipation and exodus from Egypt, and lasts for seven or eight days. The name refers to the last of the 10 plagues that God inflicted on Egypt, in which God killed the first born of every Egyptian household, but "passed over" Israelite households, leaving their firstborn children alive.

Observing Passover often includes clearing the house of leavened foods, eating unleavened foods throughout the festival, and participating in the Seder, which usually takes place at home on the

¹ "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," Pew Research Center, October 1, 2013, at <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>.

² Ephraim Jehudah Wiesenberg and Jacob Licht, "Calendar," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), p. 354.

first or second night of the festival. There are many variations on the Seder, but it generally includes reading from a book called the *Haggadah* and eating a ritualized meal.

Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah is generally observed in September or October in the Gregorian calendar. It celebrates the Jewish New Year and lasts for two days. It also marks the beginning of 10 days of repentance leading up to Yom Kippur.

During Rosh Hashanah, many Jews eat bread or a piece of apple dipped in honey so that the coming year will be sweet. Challah bread is often baked in round loaves for the holiday to symbolize the cycle of the year. The shofar (a hollowed ram's horn) is often blown. In religious communities, the holiday includes a special service at a synagogue.

Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, is generally observed for one day in September or October in the Gregorian calendar. It is generally considered the holiest day of the year.

Observing Yom Kippur often includes fasting and prayer. Synagogues generally hold multiple services throughout the day, which means that some Jews spend most of the day at a synagogue.

Hanukkah

Hanukkah (also spelled Chanukah), or the Festival of Lights, is generally observed in December in the Gregorian calendar. Lasting eight nights, it commemorates the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem in the 2nd century B.C.

During the first evening of the festival, the first branch of the menorah is usually lit. The menorah is a candelabrum with nine branches. Eight branches represent each night of the festival. The ninth branch is the shamash or helper candle, which is usually used to light all the others. On each subsequent night of the festival, an additional branch is usually lit. Common traditions include exchanging gifts, playing with a four-sided top called a dreidel, and eating certain fried foods, including latkes (a type of fried potato pancake) and doughnuts.

Other Jewish Celebrations

Sukkot

Sukkot, or the Festival of Booths, is generally observed in September or October in the Gregorian calendar. It celebrates the harvest and commemorates the 40 years that the Jews wandered the desert after leaving Egypt. The festival lasts seven to eight days.

Traditionally, Sukkot was observed by living in temporary booths called sukkot, like the temporary homes in which the Israelites lived in the desert. Other observances include special prayer services and meals.

Purim

Purim is generally observed in February or March of the Gregorian calendar. It commemorates the events of the Book of Esther, in which Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai saved the Jewish people from Haman, who sought their destruction in ancient Persia.

Purim is largely a celebratory festival. Observances can include participating in a meal called a seudat (or se'udah), exchanging gifts, giving to charity, and participating in public readings from the book of Esther. Some communities host a carnival.

Yom HaShoah

Yom HaShoah, or Holocaust Remembrance Day, is generally observed in April or May of the Gregorian calendar. It commemorates the approximately 6 million Jewish people who died in the Holocaust. Since 1979, Congress has generally recognized several days near Yom HaShoah as Days of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust.³

Because Yom HaShoah is a relatively modern commemoration, observances vary widely. The United States Holocaust Museum has a resource page that includes ways to observe Yom HaShoah, including how to organize a reading of names of those who died in the Holocaust and sample speeches for public figures.⁴

U.S. Congressional Recognition

Some Members of Congress make floor statements, issue press releases, or enter Extensions of Remarks into the *Congressional Record* to recognize holidays and observances. The following are some recent examples that may be of assistance in preparing such statements:

Representative Marco Rubio, “Rosh Hashanah,” press release, September 9, 2018.

Representative Nydia M. Velázquez, “Velázquez on Rosh Hashanah,” press release, September 7, 2018.

Representative Doug Lamborn, “Passover 2017,” press release, April 10, 2017.

Senator Patrick Leahy, “Yom Kippur’s Lessons in Irene’s Aftermath,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 157 (October 20, 2011), pp. S6858-S6859.

Representative Kendrick B. Meek, “This Hanukkah—In Honor of All Our Armed Forces and their Families this Hanukkah,” Extension of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 155 (December 17, 2009), p. E3055.

Representative Steve Cohen, “Coming Together in Unity,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 153 (March 29, 2007), p. H3282.

Senator Bill Frist, “Jewish Holiday Season,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 152 (September 22, 2006), p. S10016.

U.S. Presidential Recognition

One of the many uses of a presidential proclamation is to ceremoniously honor or call attention to certain issues or events. Some proclamations and remarks commemorating Jewish holidays from the *Compilation of Presidential Documents* include the following:

Message for Passover and Easter—President Donald J. Trump, March 30, 2018.

³ H.J.Res. 1014, H.J.Res. 44, and H.Con.Res. 18.

⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Days of Remembrance,” <https://www.ushmm.org/remember/days-of-remembrance>.

Remarks on Lighting the Hanukkah Menorah—President Barack Obama, December 2, 2010.

Message on the Observance of Rosh Hashanah—President George W. Bush, September 6, 2002.

Message on the Observance of Yom Kippur—President William J. Clinton, October 9, 1997.

Other presidential proclamations are available through the govinfo, a portal for free public access to official publications from all three branches of the government, maintained by the Government Publishing Office (GPO).

Historical and Cultural Resources

Numerous resources provide information on the history and culture of Jewish holidays. Some of these include the following:

Library of Congress, “Gathered Around the Seder Table: Images from the Passover Haggadah.” This blog post describes the Haggadah, the text read for the Passover Seder, and illustrates Passover scenes.

“The Washington Haggadah.” A fifteenth century Hebrew manuscript held by the Library of Congress.

Smithsonian.com, “Why Honey is Eaten for Rosh Hashanah, and Other Burning Questions.” This blog post discusses the meaning behind several Rosh Hashanah traditions.

National Museum of African American History and Culture, “Rosh Hashanah.” This image of an African American synagogue celebrating Rosh Hashanah is part of a collection called “The Commandment Keepers: African American Jewish Congregation in Harlem.”

Library of Congress, “The Faith of Far Away Moses: Yom Kippur, 1893.” This blog post looks back at how Yom Kippur was celebrated at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893.

Library of Congress, “Highlighting the Holidays: Happy Hanukkah.” This blog post includes links to many Hanukkah-related collections.

Related CRS Reports

CRS Report R41990, *Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices*, by Jacob R. Straus.

CRS Report R43539, *Commemorations in Congress: Options for Honoring Individuals, Groups, and Events*, coordinated by Jacob R. Straus.

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