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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 (2020 data), about 2.4% of Americans (7.5 million people) self-identify as religiously or culturally Jewish. Roughly 27% of American Jews describe themselves as culturally, but not religiously, Jewish.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

The key to identifying calendrical observance of Jewish holidays is the knowledge that Jewish holidays begin at sunset and end at sunset of a subsequent 24-hour period.

## 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 firstborn of every Egyptian household, but "passed over" Israelite households, leaving their firstborn children alive.

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<sup>1</sup> "Jewish Americans in 2020," Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, at <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>.

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

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 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, prayer, and reflections on repentance. 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

Because Yom HaShoah is a relatively modern commemoration, observances vary widely. The United States Holocaust Memorial 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.<sup>4</sup>

## U.S. Congressional Recognition

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

Representative James R. Langevin, “Holocaust Remembrance Day.” (Yom HaShoah), House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, vol. 168, no. 69 (April 27, 2022), p. H4562.

Representative Brenda L. Lawrence, “Holocaust Remembrance Day.” House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, vol. 168, no. 69 (April 27, 2022), p. H4562.

Senator Patrick Leahy, “Yom Kippur,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 166, no. 171 (October 1, 2020), pp. S6021-S6022.

Senator Kevin Cramer, “Senate Resolution 710 – Commemorating the High Holidays Celebrated and Commemorated by the Jewish People in the United States, in Israel, and Around the World and Recognizing the Many Accomplishments and Contributions of the Jewish Community in the United States,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 166, no. 161 (September 17, 2020), p. S5714.

Representative Elaine G. Luria, “Rabbi Israel Zoberman – Jewish High Holy Days (Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur),” Extensions of Remarks, *Congressional Record*, daily editions, vol. 167, No. 156 (September 10, 2021), pp. E965-E966.

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<sup>3</sup> H.J.Res 1014, H.J.Res 44, H.Con.Res. 18, and S.Res. 142.

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

Senator Patrick Leahy, “Yom Kippur,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 166, no. 171 (October 1, 2020), pp. S6021-S6022.

Senator Kevin Cramer, “Senate Resolution 710 – Commemorating the High Holidays Celebrated and Commemorated by the Jewish People in the United States, in Israel, and Around the World and Recognizing the Many Accomplishments and Contributions of the Jewish Community in the United States,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 166, no. 161 (September 17, 2020), p. S5714.

Representative Glenn Grothman, “Grothman Statement on Hanukkah,” press release, December 30, 2019.

Representative Adriano Espaillat, “Representative Adriano Espaillat Marks the Beginning of Rosh Hashanah,” press release, September 27, 2019.

Senator Rob Portman, “Portman Recognizes Beginning of Rosh Hashanah,” press release, September 14, 2012.

## **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:

Remarks at a Hanukkah Reception—President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., December 19, 2022.

Message on the Observance of Rosh Hashanah—President Donald J. Trump, September 18, 2020.

Statement on the Observance of Passover—President Barack Obama, April 22, 2016.

Message on the Observance of Yom Kippur—President George W. Bush, October 7, 2008.

Presidential proclamations and remarks from 1993 to the present are available through the govinfo service on the Government Publishing Office website. Earlier remarks are available through The American Presidency Project, established by the University of California, Santa Barbara.

## **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.

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

Henry Ford College, “What Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Mean.” The summary explains what is celebrated during the Jewish High Holy Days.

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.”

Jewish Virtual Library, “Yom Kippur: History and Overview.” The website provides a detailed explanation of the significance of the Yom Kippur holiday in Jewish culture.

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, in 1893.

UCF Today, University of Central Florida, “What is Hanukkah?” The article explores customs associated with Hanukkah.

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

Jewish Museum of London, “Sukkot and the Significance of Pilgrimage.” The page highlights items from the museum’s collection while explaining the celebration of Sukkot.

British Broadcasting Corporation, “Purim: What is the Jewish Festival and How Is It Celebrated?” The page addresses the reasons for observing Purim and how Jewish people celebrate the holiday.

Jewish Virtual Library, “Jewish Holidays: Yom HaShoah – Holocaust Memorial Day.” The page examines the rituals carried out on this day, in particular how observances in Israel differ from those in the United States.

## **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

## **Author Information**

Gary Sidor  
Senior Technical Information Specialist

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