



## Jewish Federation of Greater Oklahoma City

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### Understanding Jewish Holiday Observances

Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) of the Jewish Federation of Greater Oklahoma City

#### Understanding Distinctions of Holiday Observances

It is important to recognize that people of any particular faith have distinctions in their personal observance. Those distinctions may be based on different interpretations within the particular faith tradition and/or personal choices.

In the United States today, there are four major denominations or “movements” within Judaism – Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist. There are distinctions in holiday observances between and amongst the Jewish denominations.

An example of different interpretations would be that some Jews observe two full days for *Rosh HaShanah*, the Jewish New Year, while some only observe the holiday for one day (more explanation on this below). An example of personal choice would be that not all people identifying as Christians may attend services on Christmas, not all people identifying as Muslim may fast during Ramadan, not all people identifying as Jews may fast on *Yom Kippur*, etc. Additionally, people of different faith traditions may be more observant in some areas and less observant in others; for example, some Jews attend synagogue regularly but do not keep kosher, some Muslims may not attend a Mosque but refuse to eat pork, etc.

Organizations, schools and school districts may want to consider some of the following language/ideas in holiday related memos to faculty and staff members: *Throughout the year there are religious holidays in which student/staff religious beliefs and observances require them to be absent from school. Depending on a student/staff member’s individual observance level, they may or may not be absent from school on a particular holiday.*

#### The Jewish Calendar

The Jewish calendar is a lunar-based calendar, which means the dates “float” on the Gregorian calendar. The months on the Jewish calendar have different names than the Gregorian calendar and a different number of days in each month. Thus, sometimes Jewish holidays fall on weekdays and sometimes on weekends. Jewish holidays all begin at sunset. Most calendars indicate the day or first day of the holiday; Jewish holidays actually begins at sunset the day before (some calendars indicate this as “*erev*,” meaning the “evening of”). While the Jewish calendar is filled with many holiday observances, some of the better known ones are listed below:

- ✚ *Shabbat*, or the Sabbath, is a weekly holiday falling from sundown Friday night through sundown Saturday night. Jews of many denominations and observance levels will not engage in any work or school activity and will not go to a place of business or spend money. Any time a school or school district chooses to schedule an event which falls anytime from Friday night to Saturday night, they are automatically eliminating participation of many Jews (as well as Seventh-day Adventists and any other faith tradition for which Saturday is their Sabbath day) who are prohibited from any type of regular weekday activity on their Sabbath day.
- ✚ *Rosh HaShanah*, “Jewish New Year,” is observed for one day by most Reform Jews and for two days by most Conservative and Orthodox Jews.
- ✚ *Yom Kippur*, “Day of Atonement,” is the holiest day on the Jewish calendar; the holiday is observed for about 26 hours – from sunset to a little beyond sundown. *Yom Kippur* observances for adults include fasting for the entire holiday.
- ✚ *Sukkot*, “Festival of Booths;” *Shemini Atzeret*, “Eighth Day of Assembly;” and *Simhat Torah*, “Rejoicing of the Torah;” are three holidays that are separate but consecutive and seem like one long holiday. Most Reform Jews observe the first and last days as days with work and school prohibitions (for a total of 8 days); most other Jews observe the first two and last two days as days with special observances (for a total of 9 days).

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9
Sukkot Prohibitions	Sukkot Prohibitions for those observing two days	Sukkot No Prohibitions	Sukkot No Prohibitions	Sukkot No Prohibitions	Sukkot No Prohibitions	Hoshana Rabah – Last day of Sukkot <i>No specific prohibitions but morning services might cause late arrival to school/work</i>	Shemini Atzeret Prohibitions 8-day observers combine Shemini Atzeret & Simḥat Torah on this day	Simḥat Torah Prohibitions for those observing two days

- ✚ *Hanukkah*, “Dedication,” is a holiday lasting 8 days. While it has its own special observances, there are no work or school prohibitions associated in its observance. It is included in this list because many people think the length of the holiday gives it prominence regarding prohibitions.
- ✚ *Purim*, “Feast of Lots,” is a holiday without specific school or work prohibitions, but those observing may be late to school/work due to morning religious services.
- ✚ *Pesah*, Passover, is a holiday observed for 7 days by most Reform Jews and for 8 days by most other Jews. For those observing it for 7 days, the first and last days have work/school prohibitions and for those observing it for 8 days the first two and last two days have work/school prohibitions.
- ✚ *Shavuot*, “Feast of Weeks,” is observed one day by most Reform Jews and for 2 days by most other Jews. Work/school prohibitions hold true for observance of one or two days.

Please see the [Hebcal site](#) for a listing of all Jewish holidays throughout the year (this site allows you to pull up Jewish holiday dates for any year). Note that Jewish holidays begin sundown on the evening before the date specified and that members of the Jewish community observe the length of some holidays differently (one- or two-day observances).

### Additional Resources

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has an online calendar of holidays for most major religious traditions, including holiday descriptions, which can be accessed at [Calendar of Observances \(adl.org\)](#).

Note – when transliterating Hebrew, h or H, represents the Hebrew letter *het* (which is sometimes transliterated as “ch,” “kh,” or “h”).

The Jewish Federation of Greater Oklahoma City is pleased to provide this resource to schools and organizations in the Greater Oklahoma City area. Please feel free to reach out to our office if we can help you with any additional resources on Judaism.

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