Jewish Holiday Guide
Tu B’Shvat

15th day of Shvat
“...Just as my ancestors planted for me, so I will plant for my children (Talmud Ta’anit 23a).”

Tu B’Shvat is a time when we celebrate the New Year for trees. It falls on the 15th of Shvat in the Hebrew calendar and it is a time for us to focus on our ecological responsibilities and the life cycle of renewal.

The very first task that was assigned to humans by God was to care for the environment:

‘God took man and put him into the garden to work it and guard it...’ (Genesis 1:15).

In Israel, Tu B’Shvat is usually celebrated by planting trees and holding the Tu B’Shvat seder. Planting trees is a custom that was first held in 1884 in Israel due to the spiritual significance of the land of Israel and the agricultural emphasis that the Zionist brought with them to Israel. The Tu B’Shvat seder is formed out of 4 sections for the 4 worlds as the Kabbalah says:

- The spiritual world of God represented by fire – Atzilut (nobility)
- The physical world of human represented by earth – Assiyah (Doing)
- The emotional world represented by air – Briyah (Creation)
- The philosophical, thoughtful world represented by water – Yetzirah (Making)

Each section of the seder also represents one of the four seasons, and mixtures of red and white wine are drunk in different amounts as a representation of the natural cycle.
Purim is one of the most joyous and fun holidays on the Jewish calendar, as it celebrates the story of two heroes, Esther and Mordecai, and how their courage and actions saved the Jewish people living in Persia from execution. The story of Purim is told in the Book of Esther, and the main story begins when the king of Persia, Ahasuerus, sends his wife Vashti away for disobeying him. The King chooses Esther to be his new wife, and without revealing her Jewish identity to the King, she becomes the queen of Persia.

Haman, the king’s prime minister, became upset when Mordecai (Esther’s cousin) refused to bow down to him, (as worshiping idols is against Jewish law). This was not acceptable to Haman, so in a plot to destroy the Jewish people, Haman went to the King and told him “There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your realm. Their laws are different from those of every other people’s, and they do not observe the king’s laws; therefore it is not befitting the king to tolerate them.” The king gave the fate of the Jewish people to Haman, to do as he pleased. Haman planned to exterminate all the Jews.

Mordecai persuaded Esther to speak to the king on behalf of the Jewish people. This was a dangerous request, as the King had not “summoned” her to speak to him, and her Jewish identity had not been known to the King. However, Esther was courageous and went to the king. She revealed her own Jewish identity to the King and revealed Haman’s plot against her people. The King was outraged at Haman, and he issued a decree to make Haman the victim of his own plot. Haman and his sons were hanged on the gallows that had been prepared for Mordecai and the Jews.

The word “Purim” means “lots” and refers to the lottery that Haman used to choose the date for killing the Jewish people. The Jews are saved and Mordechai declares the 14th day of Adar a day for rejoicing and celebrating, as Purim.

During this holiday, it is customary to dress up in costume, eat hamentachen (fruit-filled pastries), send Mishloach Manot (gift baskets), and read the Megillah (story of Esther). It is also customary during the reading of the Megillah to boo, hiss, stamp feet and rattle graggers whenever the name of Haman is mentioned.
Passover is one of the greatest stories of religious freedom ever told, the story of the Exodus is the Israelites’ struggle from slavery to freedom, and their covenant with God at Mount Sinai. The quest for religious freedom, for the right to be a Jew is an ongoing struggle for many Jews around the world, and the Jewish people commit themselves anew to it each year at the Passover Seder.

The Passover Seder (meaning order) is probably the most celebrated and beloved of Jewish home rituals. It is believed that the obligation to tell the story of the Exodus was observed by Jews’ ancestors ever since the actual Exodus itself.

As a home event involving the full family as well as guests, the Seder requires the participation of the old and young. In order to tell the story, Jews have created a “script” for the ritual of Passover, called the Haggadah (literally, “telling”). It contains questions and answers, stories, show and tell, song, and food.

On an individual level, the Seder requires each participant to feel as though he/she personally left Egypt. On a global level the Seder symbolizes the redemption from slavery and the formation of the Jewish state that did not exist as a nation before the Exodus from Egypt.

“Jews all over the world end the Seder by saying, “Next year in Jerusalem.” The desire to return to this land has included the desire to practice Judaism without restriction in a Jewish context.
Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Israel’s Independence Day is celebrated on the fifth day of the month of Iyar, which is the Hebrew date of the formal establishment of the state, when members of the “provisional government” read and signed a Declaration of Independence in Tel Aviv. The original date corresponded to May 14, 1948.

Most of the Jewish communities in the Western world have incorporated this modern holiday into their calendars, but some North American Jewish communities hold the public celebrations on a following Sunday, in order to attract more participation. In the State of Israel it is a formal holiday; so almost everyone has the day off.

Yom Ha'Atzmaut in Israel is always preceded by Yom Hazikaron-Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers. The message of linking these two days is clear: Israelis owe their independence—the very existence of the state—to the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for it.

The official “switch” from Yom Hazikaron to Yom Ha'atzmaut takes place a few minutes after sundown, with a ceremony on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem in which the flag is raised from half staff (due to Memorial Day) to the top of the pole. The president of Israel delivers a speech of congratulations, and soldiers representing the army, navy, and air force parade with their flags.
Lag BaOmer

38th day of Iyar

Lag BaOmer is the literal translation of the 33rd day of the Omer Count, which is a Jewish custom that counts 49 days from Passover to Shavu’ot marking several events in Jewish history.

Lag BaOmer is a time of semi-mourning; it is the solemn “break” during the Omer Count, in which grieving traditions are performed.

Lag BaOmer commemorates the sole victory of the glorious Bar Kochvah, the leader of the rebellion against the Romans; as well as a celebration of the end of the horrible plague that killed many of Rabbi Akivah’s students.

Lag BaOmer is identified with Jewish heroism and the continuous struggle to maintain a Jewish identity and maintain Jewish traditions under foreign occupation.

**Lag BaOmer has many different customs and traditions:**

- **Bon Fires** – one of the most famous customs of the holiday is having bon fires – to celebrate the light and to remind us of an ancient way of communicating that the rebels used.

- **Simchas** – Lag BaOmer is the only day of joy and celebration in all 49 days between Passover and Shavu’ot and therefore, the only day in which it is allowed to celebrate Simchas, such as weddings and Bar Mitzvahs.

- **Arching games** – to celebrate Bar Kokhvah’s victory with bows and arrows.

- **Visiting the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai** – the great sage and mystic, author of the book of Kabbalah “the Zohar”, who died on the day Lag BaOmer.
Shavuot occurs on the sixth day of Sivan, exactly 50 days after the first Seder. In Hebrew, the word “Shavuot” means “Feast of Weeks,” and stands for the seven weeks during which the Jewish people prepare themselves for the giving of the Torah. Shavuot is the holiday that celebrates the moment when the Jewish people stood before God at Mt. Sinai and received the Torah. In the bible it is described as an agricultural pilgrimage holiday, a day when people come from all over the land of Israel, to the Temple, bearing gifts from the first fruits of the wheat and fruit harvest, as an offering to God.

Study is the primary way of preparing for the holiday. It is customary in some synagogues to run study sessions until late into the night or all night long. Shavuot begins with a festive meal and it is customary to have the offering of two loaves of bread made from newly harvested wheat. There is a tradition of eating dairy foods on Shavuot because when the Israelites received the Laws at Mt. Sinai, they realized that their pots were not kosher, and so they ate uncooked dairy meals instead.
Tisha B’av

9th day of Av
“the saddest day in Jewish history”

Tisha B’av, or the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, is a fasting day commemorating many tragedies that have befallen on the Jewish people over the years that coincidentally all occurred on the same date; Tisha B’av, therefore, is also called “the saddest day in Jewish history”.

On Tisha B’av we commemorate the destruction of the two temples; the first was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and the second temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. We also commemorate the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

The fast of Tisha B’av ends a 3 week mourning period that starts on the 17th day of the Hebrew month of Tamuz, and commemorates the first breach in the walls of Jerusalem, which led to the destruction of the first temple. During this time, it is not permitted to get married or have other parties, as well as cutting your hair. In the last 10 days of this period, some people refrain from eating meat or drinking wine, (except on Shabbat) and from wearing new clothes.

The fasting of Tisha B’av is very much like the fasting of Yom Kippur; it is not permitted to eat or drink (even water), bathe, shave or wear leather. In the synagogues, people will read the scroll of lamentations, or Eicha, and will spend the morning chanting and reading Kinnot.
Rosh Hashanah occurs on the first two days of the Hebrew month of Tishrei. Rosh Hashanah means “head of the year” and is the celebration of the beginning of the Jewish New year.

Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment, when God remembers and judges all human deeds and sins. During this holiday we sound the shofar, or ram’s horn, which is meant to awaken our slumbering souls to time’s passage and to what we have done, and more important, what we could do with our lives. A total of 100 notes are sounded each day. Another popular observance during this holiday is eating apples dipped in honey, a symbol of our wish for a sweet new year.

The ten days that follow are days of repentance, judgment and atonement. This period is devoted to careful examination of who we are in an attempt to become cognizant of the ways we can improve our relationships; with ourselves, with others, and with God.
The name “Yom Kippur” means “Day of Atonement.” It is a day set aside to “afflict the soul,” to atone for the sins of the past year. Yom Kippur falls on the tenth of Tishrei and brings a close to the ten days of repentance that began with Rosh Hashanah. It is spent in prayer, meditation, and fasting. During Yom Kippur we ask forgiveness from God and from each other. We pray that we will be written in the Book of Life for a new year filled with kind deeds, health, and happiness.

The Kol Nidre Service is the start of Yom Kippur and is held on Yom Kippur Eve. Some others observe a 25-hour fast beginning before sunset on the evening before Yom Kippur and ending after nightfall on the day of Yom Kippur. Some also refrain from working, washing and bathing, and wearing leather.
Sukkot, which means Festival of Booths, lasts for 7 days, from the 15-21 of Tishrei. There is a quick transition from the somber mood of repentance and judgment from the High Holiday to a holiday of rejoicing and celebration. Sukkot marks the time of the harvest of produce before the oncoming winter. During Sukkot, we are commanded to build a sukkah, or booth, and make it our home. The sukkah is a temporary structure, usually with four walls and covered with a roof of tree branches. The structure is to remind us of the portability of the huts in the desert as the Israelites wandered from place to place for forty years. The agricultural aspect of Sukkot is emphasized with the four species: the lulav (palm branch), the etrog (citron), the hadasim (myrtle), and aravot (willows). Just as the farmer harvests his crops, so we gather four kinds of vegetation and use them to praise God for the bounty He has provided us.
Shemini Atzeret is a one-day festival, which marks the conclusion of Sukkot. The rituals of kiddush and candle lighting are upheld, and ritual prayer for rain is recited. According to tradition, the world is judged at this time for how much rain will fall during the year. The yizkor, or memorial prayer for the dead, is also recited during Shemini Atzeret, as it marks the conclusion of Sukkot.
Simchat Torah completes the High Holiday cycle as it marks the completion and the beginning again of the cycle of Torah readings. Two scrolls are opened, one to the last chapter of Deuteronomy, the other to the first chapter of Genesis. The scrolls are taken from the Ark and the whole congregation walks around the synagogue with them seven times, accompanied by dancing and singing.
Hanukkah falls on the 25th day in the Hebrew month of Kislev, usually in December (at the darkest phase of the moon in the darkest season of the year). Hanukkah is also known as the “Festival of Lights”.

Hanukkah’s story begins during the second century B.C.E. Antiochus Epiphanes of Syria, ruler of the land of Israel, began the process of Hellenization that included persecution of those who continued to practice Judaism. Antiochus ordered the desecration of the Temple in Jerusalem and the killing of those who opposed him. The Jewish rebellion against this oppression was led by Mattathias and his five sons, the Maccabees, who defeated the Syrian forces and rededicated the Temple in 164 B.C.E., with an eight-day celebration.

According to the story, the Maccabees found only a single jar of consecrated oil, which was used to keep the Eternal Flame alight in the Temple. There was only enough oil to last for one day, but miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days.

**Customs and Observances**

**Dreidels** (Four-sided tops) are played with by children. Each side is inscribed with a Hebrew letter. The four letters allude to the miracle of Hanukkah. They spell out: Nes (N-miracle), Gadol (G-great), Haya (H-happened), and Sham (S-there, meaning in Israel). “A great miracle happened there.”

**Latkes** (Potato pancakes) are a traditional treat served on Hanukkah, as they are cooked in oil; another remembrance of the miracle of the oil lasting eight days.

**Gifts are exchanged**, especially between members of the family. This commonly occurs throughout the eight nights of Hanukkah.
However, in many homes, a tradition exists of reserving one night, typically the last night of Hanukkah, for tzedakah. This may mean giving gifts or money to a charity or organization of their choice, or participating hands-on in helping others in need.

**Candle Lighting**
The Hanukkah menorah – called a hanukkiyah – should be lit at sunset and placed near a window, so that people passing by can see the lights. Hanukkah candles may not be used for anything but enjoyment, so a shamash, a helper candle, is used to light the others. Starting on the right side, one candle is added each night. The last candle added is the first lit, and the lighting continues from left to right for eight days.