

Introduction to the Jewish Calendar

Basics

The Jewish Calendar is a lunar-solar calendar made up of 12 months, except during leap years which include 13 months.

Each month of the Jewish calendar begins at the first sliver of the waxing moon, and while the calendar has been calculated by mathematics and astronomical calculations since the 4th century CE by Hillel II, there are still vestigial practices that are directly related to the practice of observing the moon to determine the start of the new month.

Days & Weeks

Days of the Week

The Jewish day begins at sundown, just like a “new moon” is when it is in its dark phase. The days of the Jewish week don’t really have names, except the 7th day – which is the Sabbath. Each name of the day is the word for “day” (יִום) and then word for the numerical order of that day. So, Sunday is Yom Rishon (יְשׁוּבָה יוֹם) – First Day.

1. *yom rishon* = "first day" = Sunday
2. *yom sheni* = "second day" = Monday
3. *yom sh'lishi* = "third day" = Tuesday
4. *yom revi'i* = "fourth day" = Wednesday
5. *yom chamishi* = "fifth day" = Thursday
6. *yom shishi* = "sixth day" = Friday
7. *yom Shabbat* = “Sabbath Day” = Saturday

Shabbat

Is the weekly holiday that commemorates the completion of creation and the Holy One resting from acts of creation. It begins at sundown on Friday (*yom shishi*) and ends after sundown on Saturday (*yom Shabbat*) when three stars are visible in the night sky.

Months & Seasons

Months of the Year

In Jewish tradition there is linear time and Torah time. In the Torah the first month of year is Nisan, but most of us look at Tishrei and Rosh Hashanah as the new year, since “Rosh Hashanah” literally translates as “head of the year.”

Hebrew	English	Linear	Torah	Days	Secular	Cycle
תִּשְׂרֵי	Tishrei	1	7	30	Sep-Oct	Sowing
חֶשְׁוֹן	Cheshvan	2	8	29 or 30	Oct-Nov	Sowing
כִּסְלֵו	Kislev	3	9	30 or 29	Nov-Dec	Sowing
טֵבֵת	Tevet	4	10	29	Dec-Jan	Winter (cold)
שֵׁבַט	Shevat	5	11	30	Jan-Feb	Winter (cold)
אָדָר א	Adar I (leap years only)	6	12	30	Feb-Mar	Winter (cold)
אָדָר אָדָר ב	Adar (called Adar Beit in leap years)	6	12 (13 in leap years)	29	Feb-Mar	Winter (cold)
נִיסָן	Nissan	7	1	30	Mar-Apr	Harvest
אֵיָר	Iyar	8	2	29	Apr-May	Harvest
סִיָּוֶן	Sivan	9	3	30	May-June	Harvest
תַּמּוּז	Tammuz	10	4	29	June-July	Summer (heat)
אָב	Av	11	5	30	July-Aug	Summer (heat)
אֱלוּל	Elul	12	6	29	Aug-Sep	Summer (heat)

The Monthly Moon Cycle

Read: <http://bit.ly/GT6Lyu>

The monthly cycle of the waxing and waning of the moon is full of Jewish significance and traditions, but not tied to halachah (Jewish law), so traditions are varied.

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Rosh Chodesh – First sighting of the Moon

Read: <http://bit.ly/19K6Roi>

The beginning of each Jewish month is called Rosh Chodesh, literally head of the month. In ancient times, Rosh Chodesh was a crucially important holiday, as it set the calendar each month. In the modern era, Rosh Chodesh is considered to be a minor holiday, and is traditionally this day is considered a women's holiday.

While there is minimal liturgy for Rosh Chodesh, there are a variety of modern practices that have emerged. Visit [RitualWell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org) to explore Rosh Chodesh practices.

<http://www.ritualwell.org/categories/29>

Kiddush Levanah - The Waxing Moon

Read: <http://bit.ly/1gcdovx>

Jewish tradition also honors growing of the moon each quarter. The traditional blessing said during this time is:

Blessed are you, God, ruler of the universe, whose word created the heavens and whose breath created the heavenly hosts, who gave them ordinances that they not change their orbits. Joyful and happy are they to do the will of their creator, a worker of truth whose work is truth! To the moon God said; renew yourself, crown of glory for those borne in the womb, for they like you, are destined to renew themselves, and to give glory to their creator for the sake of God's holy honored sovereignty. Blessed are you, God, renewer of months.

While Rosh Chodesh is traditionally a women's holiday, Kiddush Levanah is traditionally a men's observance.

Kesh – The Full Moon

The 15th of each Jewish month is the full moon. Many festivals fall on the full moon of the month like Sukkot, Tu B'Shevat, Purim and Pesach.

Birkat haChodesh -- The Waning Moon

On the Shabbat before the new moon, it is traditional to say Birkat HaChodesh – the blessing for the new month.

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Hear this prayer here: <http://bit.ly/17A5Uby>

Yom Kippur Katan – the Dark Moon

The dark moon is known as the little Yom Kippur. Observing this time as a minor fast each month, began in the 16th century with the Kabbalists of Safed, Spain.

Seasons – Tekufot (תְּקוּפָה)

Read: <http://bit.ly/1cgEkFi>

The seasons in Jewish tradition are marked by the “tekufot,” the equivalent of the solstices and equinoxes – although they don’t always fall on the exact date.

- Tekufat Nisan: vernal equinox
- Tekufat Tammuz: summer solstice
- Tekufat Tishrei: autumnal equinox
- Tekufat Tevet: winter solstice

Years

Jewish New Years

Read: <http://bit.ly/19D0jpB>

The Jewish calendar, according to the Mishnah (RH1:1) actually has four new years, which align to the agrarian culture of ancient Israel.

- 1st Tishrei – Rosh Hashanah
Civil New Year, Counting of Sabbatical and Jubilee years, planting of fruit and vegetables
- 15th of Shevat – Tu B’Shevat
New Year of Trees (tithing of fruit trees)
- 1st Nisan - Pesach
New Year of Kings and religious calendar
- 1st Elul – Beginning of Selichot
New Year of Cattle (tithing of cattle)

Leap Year: Extra Month of Adar

Because the Jewish calendar is a lunar-solar calendar, and has 12.4 lunar months for each solar year the calendar loses about 11 days every year. This means to ensure that the holidays stay aligned with the agrarian cycles, there needs to be an adjustment.

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The Jewish calendar, in a 19-year cycle, adds an extra month of Adar every 3rd, 6th, 8th, 11th, 14th, 17th and 19th years of the cycle.

In this case, the holidays of Adar (Purim) moves to the second month of Adar to ensure they stay in the same relationship to the holiday of Passover in Nisan.

Next Five Leap Years:

1. 5774 (2013-2014)
2. 5776 (2015-2016)
3. 5779 (2018-2019)
4. 5782 (2021-2022)
5. 5784 (2023-2024)

7 Years: Sabbatical – שְׁמִטָּה (*Shmita*)

Read: <http://bit.ly/17A6hmf>

“Six years you will sow your land, and gather in the land’s produce; but the seventh year you will release it from work and abandon it, that the poor of your people may eat; and what remains shall be for the wild animals.” Exodus (Shemot) 23:10-11

The Sabbatical year is called the Shmita (שְׁמִטָּה) occurs every seven years, beginning and ending on Rosh Hashanah, is a year of “release.” It is a time when we are supposed to let the land lie fallow and forgive community debts. It is an ancient practice from the Torah, which is being revived in some communities in physical and spiritual formats.

Explore the primary texts of the Shmita Year:

Learn more about modern Shmita Practices:

- <http://7seedsproject.org>
- <http://www.hazon.org/resource/shmita-project/>
- <http://urbanadamah.org/programs/shmita-information/>
- <http://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/2012/09/16/embracing-the-shmita-cycle-a-new-year-vision/>

Upcoming Shmitah Years

- 5775 – 2014-2015
- 5782 – 2021-2022
- 5789 – 2028-2029

28 Years: Birkat HaChamah – Blessing of the Sun

Read: <http://bit.ly/1aAZcow>

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Every 28 years tradition tells us that the sun returns to the exact position it was in during the first moments of creation. To commemorate this, Judaism has a special ritual called Birkat HaChamah, “blessing the sun.”

Birkat HaChamah most recently occurred in 2009 (5769)

Upcoming Birkat HaChamah:

- Wednesday, 8 April 2037 (23 Nisan 5797)
- Wednesday, 8 April 2065 (2 Nisan 5825)
- Wednesday, 8 April 2093 (12 Nisan 5853)

50 Years: Jubilee - יובל (Yovel)

"This fiftieth year is sacred—it is a time of freedom and of celebration when everyone will receive back their original property, and slaves will return home to their families. " Leviticus (Vayikra) 25:10

The Jubilee year is the end of 7 cycles of 7 years, the 50th year, and like the Shmita is a year of release. In particular, the Yovel released property, including slaves, to their original owners.

Key tenets of the Yovel:

- All slaves set free.
- All property returned to original owner.

What this means is that Hebrew “slaves” were really indentured servants and property was leased, not sold in a permanent way.

Unlike the Shmita, which is still an active and living practice, the Yovel is no longer observed because according to scripture was only to be observed when all twelve tribes reside in the land of Israel.

Learn more about why the Yovel is no longer practiced: <http://bit.ly/1gBTh7Q>

Bibliography and Source Material

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Books

- Jewish Holidays by Michael Strassfield
- Jewish Book of Days by Jill Hammer
- The Jewish Cultural Tapestry: International Jewish Folk Traditions by Steven Lowenstein
- Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Fall Holidays -- Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot by Paul Steinberg, Janet Greenstein Potter
- A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven: The Jewish Life-Spiral As a Spiritual Path by Arthur Ocean Waskow
- Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays by Arthur Ocean Waskow

Websites:

- http://www.jewishgen.org/infofiles/m_calint.htm
- <http://vimeo.com/47740529>
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgyszB_SZdM
- <http://www.jewfaq.org/calendar.htm>
- http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Rosh_Hashanah/History/Rabbinic/Four_New_Years.shtml
- http://www.chabad.org/multimedia/media_cdo/aid/676125/jewish/Rosh-Chodesh.htm
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- http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/562077/jewish/Shemitah-101.htm
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yovel>
- <http://www.ou.org/chagim/shmitah.htm>

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