

“And you shall celebrate
your festivals, and be
altogether joyful!”

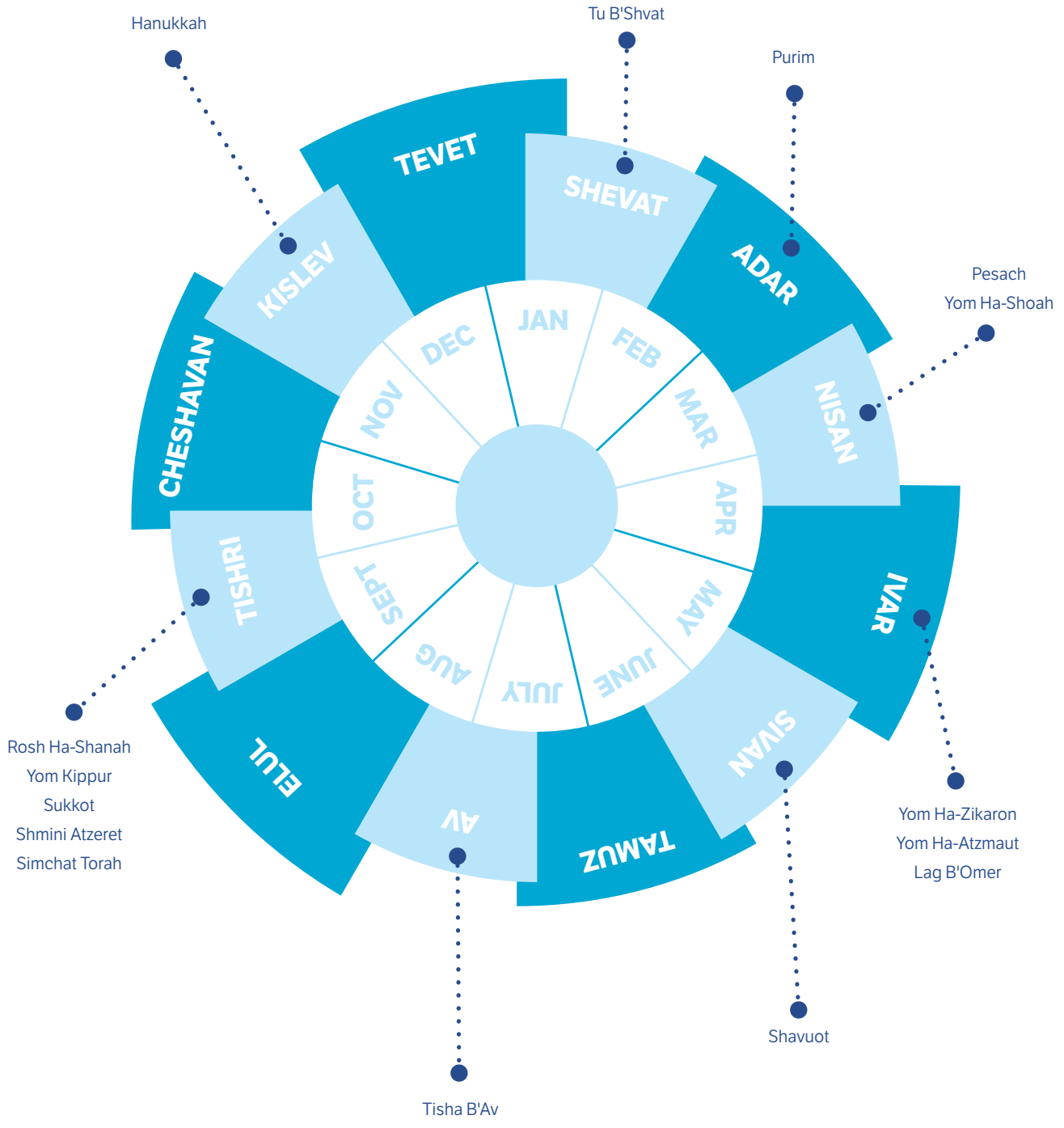
Deuteronomy 16:14-15

Sacred Days: The Festivals of the Year

Jews live by the rhythms of two calendars: one secular and the other sacred. In this class, we'll dig into on the Jewish calendar, with its seasons of celebration and reflection, to discover the transformative and timeless themes encoded in our holy days.

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Jewish Holiday Calendar



Holy Days

Festivals act as lodging for travelers making their way through the year. These festival inns are special accommodations not solely for rest or retreat from the world, but also places to halt and take our bearings to make sure we are traveling and not going around in circles.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld

The Jewish Holidays (1993)

How does one keep alive that incredible feeling of encountering God at Sinai and feeling more human, more significant than you ever did before? One of the ways the Torah offers us is the setting aside of special days when ordinary concerns are transcended so that our souls are free to concentrate on the eternal, even as married couples clear a day to mark their wedding anniversary, to recapture the way they felt about each other and what they promised each other on their wedding day, with a concentration that their busy lives otherwise don't afford them.

Rabbi Harold Kushner

To Life! A Celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking (1994)

The Jewish religion affirms the life that is here and now. At the same time, Jewish tradition insists that the final goal of paradise regained is equally worthy of our loyalty and effort. Judaism is the Jewish way to get humanity from the world as it is now to the world of final perfection. To get from here to there, you need both the goal and a process to keep you going over the long haul of history. In Judaism, the holidays supply both.

In the face of widespread evil and suffering, the holy days teach the central idea of redemption. They keep the idea real by re-staging the great events of Jewish history that validate the hope. In their variety, the holidays incorporate rich living experiences that sustain the human capacity to hold steadfast on course.

Sacred days give sustenance to spiritual life and a dimension of depth to physical life. The holy days provide a record of the struggle to be faithful to the covenant. While chronicling history, they distill the lessons learned along the way. And, because they are popular, the holidays make the dream and the process of its realization the possession of the entire people.

Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg

The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays (1993)

SHALOSH REGALIM (PILGRIMAGE HOLIDAYS)

The three Biblical harvest festivals, which retell the Torah's central narrative of liberation, revelation, and the journey to the Promised Land.

Pesach

Exodus 12:14-27

Shavuot

Leviticus 23:15-21

Sukkot

Leviticus 23:39-43

SHABBAT AND HIGH HOLIDAYS

Moments of pause and reflection, weekly and annually, that ask us to slow down and take stock.

Shabbat

Exodus 20:8-10

Rosh Ha-Shanah & Yom Kippur

Leviticus 23:23-32

HOLIDAYS OF HISTORY

Moments of joy and sadness in our history, the lessons of which we commemorate with sacred days.

Hanukkah

Purim

Tisha B'av

Yom Ha-Shoah/Yom Ha-Zikaron/Yom Ha-Atzmaut

Major Holidays of the Jewish Year

NAME	MEANING	WHEN?	MAJOR RITUALS
SHABBAT+	The greatest of Jewish spiritual institutions — an entire day each week dedicated to rest, relationship, and gratitude for life's blessings. A reminder of God's rest from Creation and our Exodus from Egypt.	Year-round	Candelighting, kiddush, hallah, festive meals, synagogue services, seudat shlishit, havdalah, rest and relaxation.
ROSH HA-SHANAH*+	The Jewish New Year. A time for contemplating the events of the past year and resolving to make change.	<i>1-2 Tishrei</i> Sept/Oct	Shofar, apples and honey, synagogue services, festive meals. In the Sephardic tradition, other symbolic foods are eaten.
YOM KIPPUR+	The Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur is the most sacred day of the Jewish calendar, marking the culmination of process of teshuvah — examining our past deeds and attempting to reconcile with those whom we have harmed.	<i>10 Tishrei</i> Sept/Oct	Teshuvah, fasting, synagogue services, shofar. Tallit is worn during the evening service.
SUKKOT**‡	Fall harvest festival. Also commemorates our ancestors' journey through the desert. Sukkot is a joyful holiday, a time for focusing on gratitude for life's bounty.	<i>15-22 Tishrei</i> Sept/Oct	Building and dwelling in a sukkah, waving the lulav and etrog, festive meals in the sukkah. The eighth day is called Shmini Atzeret.
SIMCHAT TORAH+	A joyful holiday marking the completion and immediate restarting of the Torah reading cycle, celebrating our dedication to ongoing learning.	<i>23 Tishrei</i> Sept/Oct	Reading the final passages of Deuteronomy and the first passages of Genesis, dancing and celebrating with the Torah.
HANUKKAH**	The Festival of Lights. Recalls the Maccabees' successful revolt against Syrian-Greek oppression. Hanukkah teaches us the importance of religious freedom and reminds us that miracles are possible.	<i>25 Kislev - 3 Tevet</i> Nov/Dec	Lighting the hanukkiyah for eight nights, playing dreidel, fried foods (latkes and sufganiot), giving gifts.

* Two day holiday

** Eight day holiday

+ We traditionally refrain from work during this holiday

‡ We traditionally refrain from work on the first two and last two days of this holiday

NAME	MEANING	WHEN?	MAJOR RITUALS
PURIM	Queen Esther saves her people from wicked Haman in ancient Persia — a story of Jewish communal tragedy averted through individual courage.	14 <i>Adar</i> Feb/March	Reading the Megillah of Esther, giving gifts to friends (<i>mishloach manot</i>) and to the poor (<i>matanot levyonim</i>), dressing in costume, having a party.
PESACH**‡	Festival of Freedom. Recalls the Exodus from slavery in Egypt and reminds us of our responsibility to work for liberation for all people.	15-22 <i>Nisan</i> March/April	Seder, matzah, re-telling the story of the Exodus, cleaning the home from and refraining from eating leavened foods (<i>hametz</i>).
YOM HA-SHOAH	Holocaust Memorial Day. Commemorates the murder of six million Jews, and five million others, by the Nazis.	27 <i>Nisan</i> March/April	Lighting a memorial (<i>yizkor</i>) candle, attending a community remembrance program
YOM HA-ZIKARON	Israel's Memorial Day. Remembers those soldiers who gave their lives to protect the Jewish State.	4 <i>Iyar</i> May/June	Lighting a memorial (<i>yizkor</i>) candle, attending a community remembrance program
YOM HA-ATZMAUT	Israel's Independence Day, marking the re-birth of the Jewish State after two-thousand years.	5 <i>Iyar</i> May/June	Attending an Israel festival or parade, eating Israeli foods.
SHAVUOT*+	Recalls the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai and the establishment of the Jewish covenant (<i>brit</i>) with God.	6-7 <i>Sivan</i> June/July	Staying up late into the night to study (<i>Tikkun Leil Shavuot</i>), eating sweet dairy foods like blintzes or cheesecake, reading the Book of Ruth.
TISHA B'AV	Memorial for all of the communal tragedies in Jewish history — particularly the destruction of the First and Second Temples.	9 <i>Av</i> July/Aug	Fasting, chanting the Book of Lamentations.

Sukkot

Why we celebrate:

Sukkot began as a harvest festival, and also is understood to commemorate our ancestors' journey through the desert, from Egypt to the Promised Land. Of all the Jewish holidays, Sukkot is a particularly joyful festival, a time for focusing on gratitude for all of our gifts.

How we celebrate:

Building a Sukkah:

The most notable way that this holiday is celebrated is by constructing and spending time in a sukkah. A sukkah is a temporary, booth-like structure that has an open roof constructed from natural materials, like palm fronds or bamboo mats (*schach*). Sukkot are often decorated with fruits and other symbols of the harvest. It is traditional to eat all meals in the sukkah and, when possible, to sleep in it as well.

Lulav & Etrog

During this festival we shake the lulav, a collection of leafy branches, and etrog, a citrus fruit, in the four cardinal directions, as well as up and down, in an ancient ritual that began as an ancient rite to summon the winter rains.

A lulav has four components. They include:

- A palm branch
- Myrtle branches (eye-shaped leaves)
- Willow branches (mouth-shaped leaves)
- Etrog (a lemon-like, citrus fruit)

How to shake a lulav:

Take all four of the components and hold them together, with the *pitom* (stem) of the etrog facing down. Say the following blessing(s):

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al netilat lulav.

On the first day of Sukkot add:

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam shehehianu v'kiyemanu v'higiyanu lazman hazeh.

1. Turn the etrog so that the pitom is facing up. Hold the lulav in front of you and shake it three times.
2. Repeat the same motion three times in the other five directions: Right, left, behind, up, and down.
3. Lightly scratch the surface of the etrog with your fingernail and inhale the fragrance.

Shavuot

Why we celebrate:

Shavuot began as a celebration of the Summer barley harvest, and came to also represent the establishment of the covenant between God and Israel at Mount Sinai through the giving of the Torah. Shavuot occurs seven weeks after Pesach on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Sivan (usually late-May or early-June).

How we celebrate:

Tikkun Leil Shavuot

It is traditional to stay up for much or all of the night on Shavuot to engage in Jewish study, symbolically re-enacting the experience of revelation at Sinai.

Dairy Desserts

We eat sweet, dairy foods on Shavuot, especially cheesecakes and blintzes. This is because the Jewish Tradition likens Torah to mother's milk — it is the basic nourishment that sustains us.

Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth, which contains the Bible's most famous story of conversion to Judaism, is chanted on Shavuot morning. Just as the entire Jewish people accepted Torah at Sinai on Shavuot, so too converts accept Torah when they elect to join the Jewish People.

Simple Shavuot Cheesecake

2, 8oz packages of cream cheese
1, 14oz can of sweetened condensed milk
½ cup white sugar
¼ cup lemon juice
1 teaspoon vanilla
Graham cracker crust

1. Beat cream cheese until smooth in a mixer, set to medium-high.
2. Slowly add condensed milk, sugar, lemon juice, and vanilla, continuing to beat until fully incorporated.
3. Pour filling into crust, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for 3-5 hours.
4. Slice and enjoy!

Purim: The Jewish Carnivale

On Purim Drunkenness:

Rava taught:

“On Purim, one must drink until one cannot distinguish between ‘Cursed be Haman’ and ‘Blessed be Mordechai.’”

Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira once held a Purim party together and got very drunk. In his stupor, Rabbah killed Rabbi Zeira. The next day, Rabbah prayed for mercy and revived Rabbi Zeira!

The next year Rabbah said to Rabbi Zeira:

“Come, sir, and let us make another Purim party.”
Rabbi Zeira responded: *“A miracle does not happen every day!”*

Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7b

On Celebration and Tzedakah:

On a holiday, Jews should eat meat and drink wine, for there can be no real rejoicing without meat to eat and wine to drink. And while one eats and drinks oneself, it is also a duty to feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and other poor people. One who locks the doors to their courtyard and eats and drinks with their spouse and family — without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor — that meal is not a celebration of a divine commandment, but only a celebration in one’s own belly. It is of such people that the Bible says, “Their sacrifices shall be for them as the bread of mourning, all that eat from it shall be polluted for their bread is for their own appetite” (Hosea 9:4).

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Holidays 6:18

It is preferable to spend more on gifts to the poor (*matanot l’evyonim*) than on the Purim meal or on presents (*mishloach manot*) to friends. For there is no joy greater or more glorious than the joy of gladdening the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the strangers. Indeed, one who causes the hearts of these people to rejoice acts as the Divine Presence, of whom the Bible says, “To revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Isaiah 57:15).

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Purim 2:17

Hanukkah: The Festival of Lights

2 Maccabees 10:1-9

Now Judah Maccabee and his followers recovered the Temple and Jerusalem and they tore down the altars which had been built in the public square by the foreigners. They purified the Sanctuary and made a new altar of sacrifice. Then, striking fire out of flint, they offered sacrifices after a lapse of two years, and they burned incense and lit the lamps. It happened that on the same day on which the Sanctuary had been profaned, the purification of the Sanctuary took place — that is, on the 25th day of Kislev. They celebrated for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of Sukkot, remembering how not long before, during Sukkot, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals.

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21a

The Rabbis ask: “What is Hanukkah?” On the 25th day of Kislev, the Hanukkah festival begins. There are eight days, during which eulogies for the dead and fasting are prohibited. For, when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oil stored in it. After the Maccabees had established their rule and prevailed, they searched and found one single cruse of oil, still sealed with the seal of the High Priest. But, there was only enough oil to last for one day. A miracle occurred and the supply lasted for eight days! In the following year, they appointed these days as a festival.”

How to Light a Hanukkiyah

Each night of Hanukkah, we light an additional candle to indicate the growing miracle of each successive night. On the first night, we light the *shamash* (helper) and use it to light one additional candle. On night two, we light the shamash, plus two more candles, and so on until the final night when we have a hanukkiyah full of light.

Place the hanukkiyah on or near a window, so it can be seen from the street.

Light the shamash and chant or say:

1. *Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Hanukkah.*
2. *Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam, she'asah nissim la'avoteinu ba'yamim ha-hem bazman ha'zeh.*

On the first night, we add:

3. *Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam shehehyanu v'kiyemanu v'higiyanu lazman hazeh.*

Note: Load the hanukkiyah from right to left, and light it from left to right.

The Great Latke vs. Hamentashen Debate

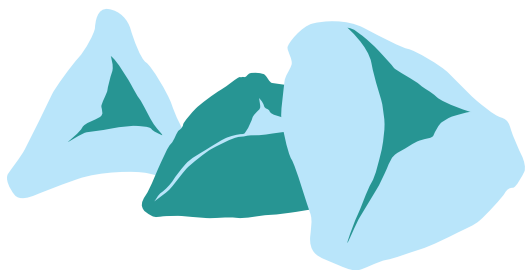
Over the years, many great ideological battles have divided the Jewish People: Pharisees vs. Sadducees, Ashkenazim vs. Sephardim, Hasidim vs. Mitnagdim, but none, perhaps, has been so fierce as the epic showdown over which is the greatest Jewish holiday treat — the latke or the hamentaschen?!

Carol Rozner's Best Hamentaschen

¾ cup margarine
1 cup sugar
1 egg
¼ cup orange juice
1 ½ tsp vanilla
3 cups flour
1 tsp baking soda
½ tsp salt
Filling (chocolate chips, jam, etc)

Directions:

Cream margarine until light and fluffy. Beat in sugar and egg. Stir in orange juice, vanilla and then remaining ingredients. Chill for at least one hour. Use a floured board. Pat out a small circle. Leave the circle fairly thick. Add the filling to the center. Shape like a triangle, leaving the center open. Pinch the sides to keep them from opening while baking. Place on ungreased cookie sheet (sill pat mat is best). Bake at 275 degrees for 10-12 minutes. Makes about 2 dozen cookies.



Rabbi Greenwald's Classic Latkes

2 lbs of russet potatoes
1 large yellow onion
2 large eggs
2-3 tbsp matzah meal
Kosher salt
Black pepper
Optional: Handful of green herbs (parsley, dill, thyme)
Vegetable oil for frying

Directions:

Roughly grate potatoes, then place in a colander and rinse well under cold, running water. Carefully dry potatoes by picking up a handful at a time and squeezing out all the liquid before placing them in a clean bowl. This process will need to be repeated a couple of times until potatoes have given up nearly all of their liquid.

Grate or chop onion in a food processor and place in colander to drain, then combine with the potatoes. Beat eggs and add to potato/onion mixture, together with several heaping tablespoons of matzah meal. If using, chop and add herbs. Combine mixture with hands to achieve a sticky but loose texture. Adjust, if necessary, by adding more matzah meal or more egg. Season liberally with salt and pepper.

Heat a half-inch of vegetable oil in a skillet until shimmering. Add a handful-sized ball of latke batter to oil and press with spatula to flatten. Do not to crowd the pan; latkes should always be completely surrounded by rapidly bubbling oil. Fry on both sides until golden brown and transfer to paper towel-lined dish or wire rack. Serve and enjoy immediately!

Celebrate: 10 Ways to Mark the Jewish Year

■ Participate in Passover Seders

Passover is the most widely observed Jewish holiday because its story of liberation is one that is eternally relevant. Attend (or host!) seders that don't just rush through the ritual to get to the meal but mix in song, storytelling, and discussion.

■ Attend synagogue for the High Holy Days

The High Holy Days are opportunities to examine our lives and to change those things that have become stale or broken. Choose a synagogue that offers deep prayer, inspiring music, and a powerful sermon.

■ Make Shabbat a regular part of your life

Life is better with Shabbat. It provides a regular escape from the daily grind and a chance to savor the things that are truly important. Fill your Shabbat with candlelight, wine, friends, and relaxation and you'll wonder how you lived without it.

■ Light Hanukkah candles

Hanukkah is not a substitute for Christmas, it is its own joyful festival of liberation in which we fill our homes with light and song and the smell of latkes. Get a hanukkiyah for everyone in the family and place them in the window to publicize our miracle.

■ Give mishloach manot on Purim

It's like trick-or-treating in reverse: On Purim we reach out to those who stand with us through thick and thin with gifts of love and chocolate.

■ Build a Sukkah and get outside

Sukkot commemorates our wandering through the desert, and so, for one week each fall, build a temporary hut in your backyard and eat and sleep under the stars.

■ Stay up all night studying on Shavuot

Reenact your college days by pulling an all-nighter, this time studying Torah and indulging in decadent dairy desserts. The next day we are bloated and exhausted, but it's an annual celebration of the Jewish love of learning that is guaranteed to inspire.

■ Fast for Tisha b'Av

Tisha b'Av honors the memory of those who perished during the tragedies of Jewish history. Fast in their honor, and fast in honor of building a more just and peaceful world.

■ Go wild on Simchat Torah

We have spent a year reading, discussing, and analyzing the Torah, now take some time to dance with it! This is one of the biggest Jewish parties of the year, a celebration of our love of Torah that usually features an open bar.

■ Host celebrations in your home

Try out a new recipe, invite over a new group of friends, and show off your new furniture, all while helping yourself and others to be immersed in Jewish culture and ritual.

Reflection on Chapter 4



I most strongly identify with the holiday of _____ because:

I haven't yet observed _____, but after this class I'm intrigued to because:

Additional Readings

Books

- Michael Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays*
An introduction to the religious practices and observances of all of the holidays. Accessible enough for a beginner, yet with sufficient depth to hold the interest of the more advanced student.
- Irving “Yitz” Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*
Moving and eloquent, this guide is an in-depth exploration of the spiritual and ethical themes of each of the major Jewish holidays. It touches on the rituals, but its main concern is the meaning and message of each holiday. A modern classic.
- Nina Beth Cardin, *Tapestry of Jewish Time*
A beautiful blend of the “how-to” for each holiday with moving insight into its relevance both individually and for the world.
- Paul Steinberg, *Celebrating the Jewish Year (3 vols.)*
These three volumes together make up an incredible collection exploring the history of Jewish holidays through the lens of traditional Jewish commentators.
- Ron Wolfson, *Hanukkah: The Family Guide to Spiritual Celebration*
A great D.I.Y. resource for how to make Hanukkah a family highlight of the year.

Websites

- *My Jewish Learning* (myjewishlearning.com)
A comprehensive and wonderful source for learning about all things Jewish. Especially detailed sections about each holiday include essays on their historical background and modern meaning, as well as recipes, tips, and practical suggestions for celebration.
- *HebCal* (hebc.com)
The invaluable interactive Jewish calendar. Want to know when Shabbat will end this week or what day will be Purim in thirty years? You’ll find out with a few simple keystrokes. They also have great resources for learning about Shabbat and each of the holidays.