

Lesson Guide: Class Four

Sacred Days: The Festivals of the Year



Miller Introduction to
Judaism Program

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



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Lesson Guide for Class #4: Sacred Days: The Festivals of the Year

Class Summary:

Overview of the major Jewish holidays' narratives, rituals, and themes, including the Shalosh Regalim, the High Holy Days, Hanukkah, Purim, and Tisha b'Av. Emphasis on the ways that the Jewish calendar conveys Judaism's core teachings and values.

Note: Some holidays, including Passover, the High Holy Days, and Shabbat, will each be given their own complete session. Emphasis should be placed in this class on the Shavuot, Sukkot, Hanukkah, Purim, and Tisha b'Av.

Objectives:

Students will:

- Learn to name the major holidays of the Jewish calendar and articulate their important most important stories, themes, and observances.
- Understand that the Jewish holidays are not just discrete celebrations, but form an experiential, annual curriculum that conveys the Jewish People's major narratives, beliefs, and concepts.
- Experience a few of the rituals involved with holiday observances.

Key Vocabulary:

- Shalosh Regalim
- Pesach (Passover)
- Shavuot
- Sukkot
- Lulav/Etrog
- Simchat Torah

- High Holy Days/Yamim Nora'im
- Rosh Ha-Shanah
- Yom Kippur
- Hanukkah
- Purim
- Tisha b'Av
- Shabbat

In-Person Teaching Materials:

- Room and door signs
- Name tags and pens
- Chalkboard, white-board, or large flip chart
- Colored markers or chalk
- On One Foot course books or printed PDFs
- Projector, computer & screen if using Class Slide Decks, On One Foot videos
- Optional: Ritual to distribute related to some of the holidays, i.e., a hanukkiah, gragger, lulav & etrog, etc. You may also wish to provide/ask students to provide refreshments that include foods for specific holidays (i.e., latkes, sofganiot, hamantaschen, blintzes, etc).

Online Teaching Materials:

- Zoom Pro Account
- PDF of On One Foot chapter
- PowerPoint Class Slide Deck
- Appropriate background, lighting, and sound setup.
- Optional: Items for display related to some of the holidays, i.e., a hanukkiah, gragger, lulav & etrog, etc.

Set Induction: "Calendar as Curriculum"

As an opening exercise, ask students to:

1. Brainstorm as many Jewish holidays as they can think of.
2. If you are **in-person**, write them on the board, as you do so, organize them (without explanation) into the pattern below. If you are **online**, use a Google Jam Board or the Zoom Whiteboard to do the same:

#1
Passover
Shavuot
Sukkot
Simchat Torah

#2
Shabbat
Rosh HaShanah
Yom Kippur

#3
Hanukkah
Purim
Tisha b'Av

Any additional holidays that they name can be placed off to the side. Yes, there are more holidays – but ten is plenty for one class! Keep these lists on the board, you'll return to reference these three columns later.

3. Now, explain that the goal of this class is to understand not just the different individual holidays, but how they all fit together to form a coherent whole. First, read the three texts in the coursebook by Strassfield, Kushner, and Greenberg. Then, discuss as a group: What does each of them say about the meaning of holidays in Judaism (not each individually but all together)? Which ones do you agree with? Which do you have questions about?

4. Greenberg describes the holidays as “lessons” that teach us about Judaism’s essential values. Explain that for this class, we will explore how the holidays serve as an experiential, educational curriculum— teaching us about Judaism’s most important ideas, stories, and values by having us act them out through rituals, food, and other experiential activities.

According to Greenberg there are three types of holidays: the Shalosh Regalim (Story of our People), Shabbat/Yamim Nora'im (Pauses to Reflect), and Holidays of History – hence the three columns.

Lecture: “Shalosh Regalim”

The Shalosh Regalim (Three Pilgrimage Holidays) were the primary holidays of the Jewish People in Biblical times. Historically, they corresponded to the three harvest seasons of the year—Spring, Summer, and Fall. As time went on, they came to be associated not just with the harvest but with retelling the foundational narrative of the Jewish People:

- Passover tells the story of Exodus.
- Shavuot recalls the giving of the Torah at Sinai.
- Sukkot re-enacts the wandering in the desert toward the Promised Land.

Each holiday provides us with experiential rituals to help us to remember the story. Students will be most familiar with Passover, so ask them to brainstorm the experiential methods used by the holiday: (symbolic foods, setting stories to music, games and dramatic reenactments, discussion prompts, etc.).

The Miller curriculum contains an entire class on Pesach, so it is not necessary to go in-depth on the holiday and its observances. However, it can be used as a familiar example to set up the pattern for other holidays that are less familiar to them.

Explain Shavuot and Sukkot by showing the experiential rituals that we do to retell the story:

- On Shavuot, we re-enact the Revelation by staying up all night to study.
- On Sukkot, we re-enact the desert journey by building a hut and dwelling outside.

You can use the Shavuot and Sukkot resource pages in the coursebook and/or the slides to guide this discussion. The PowerPoint contains a link to a well-done “lego-style” video that explains sukkot that students enjoy. For those teaching online, students can be directed to Google Image search for “sukkah” and “lulav and etrog” to give them more visuals.

A silly high point of this class for me is that I tell them I will teach them an “ancient folk dance” for Sukkot. First, all students are asked to stand (this works perfectly well on Zoom, too), and then I slowly, very seriously demonstrate and have them repeat my actions: “Put your right arm in, then take it back, put it back in, and give a wave.” Repeat with the left arm....

By this point, most students will recognize “the hokey pokey.” You can explain that this was originally a sukkot dance, but it was called the ch-okey pokey! The point is that Sukkot is our MOST experiential holiday because we put our WHOLE SELVES in, and then we SHAKE THEM ALL ABOUT (lulav and etrog). While this seems pretty corny, it demonstrates what we’ve been discussing, that the holidays are rooted in the insight that we remember what we DO. Chances are that long after they have forgotten what we talked about the holiday, they’ll remember doing the hokey pokey and be reminded that Sukkot is a holiday in which we go “all-in!”

Dancing also sets up a final discussion of Simchat Torah – in which we complete the annual Torah reading cycle, roll back to the beginning and start again, and then re-enact the cyclical nature of study by doing seven circular dances (*hafakot*). While

not technically one of the Shalosh Regalim, it completes the annual holiday cycle, just as it does the Torah reading cycle, and marks its restarting.

Break

Lecture & Discussion: More Holidays

After the break, do a quick review (either turn to a partner or use the chat function):

What is something you learned in the last section that you want to remember?

Explain that for people to learn, they can't just have information constantly coming at them; they also need to pause and reflect. The next category of holidays – Shabbat and the High Holy Days/Yamim Nora'im are weekly and annual opportunities to do exactly that – to check in on the week or year that preceded and to take stock before proceeding to whatever comes next.

Since these holidays will each get an entire session, it is not necessary to go in-depth with them at this point. The key takeaway here is that the Biblical holidays contain both holidays that re-tell our major stories and holidays that create opportunities for reflective pauses throughout the year.

The Holidays of History: Over the course of post-Toraitic Jewish history, many powerful events have continued to happen to us that we choose to remember by establishing a special day for re-enacting them. The three major holidays of this type are Hanukkah, Purim, and Tisha b'Av — for remembering two joyful stories of liberation and one tragic story of destruction. Modern holidays like Yom HaShoah and Yom HaAtzamat follow the same strategy.

Hanukkah: Commemorates the re-dedication of the Temple, after the successful Maccabean Revolt against the Syrian Greeks, led by Antiochus IV. Centuries later, the Rabbis worried that the military example of the Maccabees might lead to more disastrous revolts against Rome. Hence, they reframed the holiday as a celebration of light, adding a potent spiritual metaphor to what was originally a celebration of military victory.

There is a video in the On One Foot Video Companion specifically on "The True Miracle of Hanukkah." You may find it helpful to show that video rather than lecture here to vary the modality.

Purim: The topsy-turvy tale of Esther, who is elevated to Queen of Persia by the drunken King Achashverosh after she wins a beauty contest. Esther is then uniquely positioned to save her people from destruction when the wicked vizier, Haman, plots against the Jews. This holiday acknowledges life's precarious and fickle nature — which we respond to with raucous celebration and an additional measure of tzedakah (*matanot l'evyonim*) and gifts to friends (*mishloach manot*).

Tisha b'Av: Commemorates the moments in Jewish history when we did not prevail over our enemies: beginning with the destruction of the two Temples, but also including the many horrors we have faced over our history.

We recommend that in addition to lecture (this class contains A LOT of information, and it can quickly become entirely frontal), the instructor selects either the "Hanukkah: In-Depth" or the "Purim: In-Depth" text sheets in the coursebook for chavruta/small group discussion (online, use breakouts here).

The Hanukkah text sheet includes two versions of the Hanukkah story, one from the Book of Maccabees and one from the Talmud. They can be compared/contrasted in chavruta or small groups with the question: "What aspect of the Hanukkah story is most important to the author of each text? What does that say about their worldview? What does that say about the meaning of the holiday for us today?"

The Purim text sheet includes a text from the Talmud on the "mitzvah" to get drunk on Purim and two texts from Maimonides on the intersection of celebration and tzedakah. They can be discussed in chavruta or small groups with the question: "What is a true celebration? What is it not? How can we make all our holiday celebrations an opportunity for righteous behavior?"

We also recommend taking some time to demonstrate Hanukkah candle lighting (either in-person or on Zoom). There is also a video embedded in the PowerPoint, but it is more beneficial to see the instructor model it. This is an important "Jewish at home" skill.

The Miller Program can provide *Hanukkah at Home* guides, or these can be downloaded and distributed as PDFs, to share with students.

Wrap Up and Reflection

Journal Prompt: "I mostly strongly identify with the holiday of..." and "I haven't yet observed.... But after this class I'm intrigued because..."

Instructors should be checking for understanding throughout the lesson and regularly pausing for questions. However, it is essential to do so at the close of each class. In addition to using the journal prompts included in coursebook, the instructor may wish to do a group check for understanding using one of the following methods:

- As a whole class, have students go around and briefly state/write in chat one thing they learned/that surprised them/that interested them in class.
- Have students divide into pairs and share with their partner something they learned/that surprised them/that particularly interested them.

If you want to check that the students understand primary content, at the end of this class, students should be able to name the major Jewish holidays be able to share 2-3 sentences about the origins and practices of each.

At Home Work

Ensure that students are registered for the On One Foot Video Companion. Students should be told to watch the "Three Festivals" AND "True Miracle of Hanukkah" videos and answer the review questions and journal prompts.

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 l'evyonim</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.