

Jewish Greetings Cheat Sheet

By InterfaithFamily.com

Ever hear someone use a Jewish greeting and aren't sure what it means or how to respond? Happy and sad lifecycle moments, Jewish holidays and other occasions all have Jewish greetings attached. Here are some traditional Hebrew or Yiddish responses and their meanings—and a virtual pat on the back. You're doing fine!

The most common Jewish greeting is Shalom, a Hebrew word which means hello, goodbye and peace.

Happy Occasions

B'chatzlacha!

[Pronounced *be-hatz-la-ka*]

This means good luck!

B'sha'ah tovah

[Pronounced *be-sha-ah toe-vah*]

Don't say mazel tov when someone says they are pregnant. They don't have the baby yet. Instead say "b'sha'ah tovah," or "in a good hour"—meaning something like, I hope this works out perfectly. If you feel uncomfortable pronouncing that, say, "I'm so happy for you."

Mazel tov

[Pronounced *mah-zel tohv*]

Though this expression means literally good luck (or "a good sign"), it's always used to mean congratulations. It's something to say to couples getting married, parents of children becoming bar or bat mitzvah and new parents (but not to be said to expecting parents). It's also a nice thing to say to someone who has a birthday, or gets a new job or a new car.

One thing that makes Jewish subculture a little different from the dominant culture is that it's typical to congratulate the parents, siblings and friends of people getting married, having a baby or watching their relative become bar or bat mitzvah. If someone says "Congratulations!" to you when you say you are going to a friend's wedding, say, "Thanks," not, "It's not my wedding, you goofball."

You might also hear some wise guy yell "Mazel tov" in a Jewish delicatessen when someone drops dishes. That's because at Jewish weddings, it's traditional to break a glass and sometimes also a plate.

Tithadesh or tithadshi

[Pronounced *Teet-ha-desh* or *Teet-had-she*]

When your friend gets new clothes, a new house or a new car, there is a special way to congratulate them—“Tithadesh,” may it renew you. (The feminine form of this word is “tithadshi.”) There isn’t a really a good English equivalent, because there’s no specific way of congratulating people on getting new things—but you can always say, “Congratulations, enjoy it!”

Yasher Koach

[Pronounced *Ya-shair Ko-akh*]

When someone has an aliyah (is called up to the Torah during a service) or reads from the Torah, or does some public ritual in the synagogue, one traditional thing to say is “Yasher koach,” may your strength increase. If you feel uncomfortable pronouncing that, you can say, “Good job” and shake their hand. If someone says that to you, reply, “Baruch tihiyeh”—or just, “Thanks!”

Sad Occasions

Next time, at a simchah

When you see someone you love at a sad occasion like a funeral, what do you say? There is a Yiddish expression, “Oyf simches” which means, “Let’s only meet at happy occasions.” A good substitute is, “Glad you could make it,” or “Hope the next time we meet is at a happier occasion.”

Ha-Makom yinachem etchem...

[Pronounced *Ha-ma-comb yin-ahem et-hem*]

There is a traditional Hebrew phrase to say at funerals and houses of mourning, “Ha-Makom hu yinachem et chem b’toch avlei tsiyon v’yerushalayim.” It means, “May the Merciful One comfort you among the mourners for Zion and Jerusalem.” It seems unlikely you will need to say this, but it’s good to be in the know. You don’t really have to say anything, just be there and listen. Or say, “I’m sorry.”

May their memory be a blessing

When expressing condolences, a common Jewish saying is “May his/her memory be a blessing.” This can go along with “Sorry for your loss.”

For more about what to say when you visit a house of mourning, see “How to Pay a Shiva Call,” and our booklet, *Mourning the loss of a Jewish loved one*.

Times of Day

Boker tov

[Pronounced *bo-ker Tohv*]

Literally, “good morning.” Nice replies are “boker tov” right back, or “boker or,” meaning “morning light.”

Erev tov

[Pronounced *air-ev Tohv*]

Literally, “good evening.” You can reply “erev tov” right back.

Lilah Tov

[Pronounced *Lie-Lah Tohv*]

Literally, “good night.” An appropriate response is to say “lilah tov” back.

Holidays

Chag Sameach

[Pronounced *CHAHG sah-MAY-ach*]

(Happy holiday) with a heavy guttural h at the beginning of the first word and the end of the second. Or if you are really sophisticated, Moadim l’simcha, which means “festivals for joy.” You may also hear “gut yuntuv,” which is Yiddish for happy holiday. This is typically said on Sukkot and Simchat Torah, Purim and Shavuot. It can really be said for any holiday, however.

Shabbat Shalom

[Pronounced *sha-baht sha-loam*]

The most traditional greeting on Shabbat is the easiest: “Shabbat Shalom,” good Sabbath! You might also hear Gut Shabbes, which is Yiddish for good Sabbath. Saying Good Sabbath or Good Shabbes is a great way of greeting someone on Shabbat without speaking Hebrew. We say this to welcome one another or say goodbye on Shabbat.

Shavua Tov

[Pronounced *Sha-voo-ah Tohv*]

Shabbat officially ends when there are three stars in the sky on Saturday night. Some close Shabbat with the short ceremony of Havdalah, meaning “separation,” to mark the separation of Shabbat from the rest of the week. Starting on Saturday night, people often wish each other “shavua tov,” meaning “a good week,” as a wish for the coming week. You might even hear people saying this through Sunday. You can repeat, “shavua tov!” to them right back.

Shanah Tovah

[Pronounced *Shaa-nah Toh-vah*]

Traditional greetings on Rosh Hashanah include, “L’Shanah Tovah tikatevu,” which means, May you be inscribed for a good year, or just “Shanah Tovah,” which means “a good year.” Some say “Happy New Year!” or “a happy and healthy New Year.” You might also hear people greet in Yiddish, “Gut yomtev,” which means happy holiday.

Gamar hatimah tova

[Pronounced *ga-mar ha-ti-mah toh-vah*]

A traditional greeting for Yom Kippur is “Gamar hatimah tova:” a good completion to your inscription (in the book of life). Some say “Gamar tov,” a good completion. Some say “Shanah tova” or Happy New Year, and some say “Tzom kal” or have an easy fast.

Happy Hanukkah

[Pronounced *Ha-noo-kah*]

The big challenge here for many English-speakers is that initial heavy H sound, like the J in Jose or the ch in Loch Ness. (That’s why the holiday is sometimes spelled Chanukah.) Say Happy Hanukkah, do your best with the initial guttural h, smile and don’t worry.

Happy Purim

[Pronounced *poo-rim*]

The best greeting is Happy Purim! Some say Chag Sameach, which means Happy Holiday or Purim Sameach which means Happy Purim! This is a very fun, festive holiday and it’s all about the happy.

Happy Pesach or Passover

[Pronounced *pay-sakh*]

On Passover, some people say “Hag Sameah v’ kasher”—have a happy and kosher holiday. Or try Happy Pesach (Hebrew for Passover) or Happy Passover.

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