

Glossary of Hebrew Terms

Judaism has its own vocabulary, including terms for customs and ceremonies, holidays, rituals, and life-cycle events. Many terms and phrases are in Hebrew or Yiddish. The more terms that you can identify, the more comfortable and confident you will feel.

This is a beginner's list of frequently used words and phrases. Use it as a reference. With time and experience most of them will become a basic part of your own vocabulary of life.

Synagogue Terms

Aliyah. The honor of being called to recite the Torah blessings during a synagogue Torah reading.

Aron HaKodesh. "Holy ark." The receptacle in which the Torah scrolls are kept.

Beit Knesset. "House of assembly." The synagogue.

Bimah. Platform-pulpit area in a synagogue.

Haftarah. "Conclusion." The prophetic section recited after the reading of the Torah on Sabbaths, festivals, and other occasions.

Hazzan. Cantor.

Kippah. Skullcap.

Maḥzor. (1) Prayerbook used on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. (2) Special prayerbook for one of the three Pilgrimage Festivals.

Minyan. Quorum of ten adults needed for a public prayer service.

Ner Tamid. "Eternal light." Light above the ark which is always kept burning.

Oneg Shabbat. "Shabbat joy." Celebration after Friday evening services which often includes refreshments, singing, Israeli dancing, and discussions.

Sefer Torah. The Torah scroll, consisting of the Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Shul. Synagogue (Yiddish).

Siddur. Prayerbook.

Sidrah. The weekly portion of the Torah that is read aloud at services.

Tallit. Prayer shawl worn during morning prayer services and on Kol Nidrei eve.

Holiday Terms

Shabbat

Besamim. Spices used during the Havdalah service.

Hallah. Braided bread used on Sabbaths and festivals.

Erev Shabbat. The eve of the Sabbath (Friday evening).

Hamotzi. Blessing said over bread.

Havdalah. "Separation." Service on Saturday night bidding farewell to the Sabbath.

Kabbalat Shabbat. "Welcoming the Sabbath." Service just before the evening service on Friday night.

Kiddush. "Sanctification." Blessing over wine.

Motza-ey Shabbat. The "departure" of the Sabbath.

Seudah Shelisheet. "Third meal" eaten during late Sabbath afternoon.

Shabbat Shalom. "Sabbath Peace." A Sabbath greeting.

Shaḥarit. The morning service.

Shomer Shabbat. A Sabbath observer.

Zemirot. Sabbath (or festival) songs sung at the table.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

Al Ḥeit. Opening words, and hence the title, of Yom Kippur confessional prayer.

Aseret Y'may Teshuvah. The Ten Days of Repentance from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur. Also known as the Days of Awe.

Baal Toke'ah. Person who sounds the shofar.

Gemar ḥatimah tovah. "May your final verdict be a favorable one." Greeting for the days after Rosh HaShanah.

High Holy Days. Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, and the days in between.

Kol Nidrei. Liturgical text which ushers in Yom Kippur.

Leshanah tovah tikateivu. "May you be inscribed for a good year." Greeting for Rosh HaShanah.

Mahzor. Festival prayerbook.

Neilah. Closing service of Yom Kippur.

Seliḥot. (1) Prayers of forgiveness recited during High Holy Days. (2) Penitential prayer service beginning at midnight on Saturday preceding Rosh HaShanah. If Rosh HaShanah falls on Tuesday or earlier in week, the recitation of Selichot begins on Sunday morning of preceding week.

Shofar. Ram's horn.

Shevarim. Three blasts of the shofar.

Tekiah. One blast of the shofar.

Tekiah Gedolah. One very long shofar blast.

Teruah. Nine short blasts of the shofar.

Teshuvah. Repentance.

Yamim Noraim. The Days of Awe. The ten days of repentance from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur. Also known as Aseret Y'may Teshuvah.

Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, Simhat Torah

Aravot. Long narrow willow leaves attached to lulav.

Etrog. Citron, one of Four Species used during Sukkot.

Four Species (Arba Minim). Collective term for etrog, lulav, aravot (willows), and hadassim (myrtle) used on Sukkot.

Hadassim. Myrtle leaves attached to lulav.

Ḥag Sameiaḥ. "Happy holiday." Festival greeting.

Hakafot. Processions around sanctuary with Torah scroll on Sukkot and Simḥat Torah.

Ḥatan Beresheet. "Bridegroom of Genesis." Special honor on Simhat Torah of being called up for first *sidrah* in annual cycle of Torah readings.

Ḥatan Torah. "Bridegroom of Torah." Special honor on Simhat Torah of being called up for last *sidrah* in annual cycle of Torah readings.

Ḥol Hamoed. Intermediate days of a festival; work is permitted.

Lulav. Palm branch, one of the Four Species.

S'khakh. Greens covering the roof of the sukkah.

Sukkah. Small booth used on Sukkot.

Yizkor. Memorial prayer for the dead recited on or near last day of every major festival.

Ḥanukkah

Al HaNissim. Special prayer of deliverance.

Antiochus. Syrian king who forbade Jews to practice their religion.

Dreidel (sevivon in Hebrew). Four-sided top used in Hanukkah games.

Hallel. Psalms praising God recited on Hanukkah, Rosh Ḥodesh, and Pilgrimage Festivals.

Ḥanukkah. Festival of Dedication, occurring on twenty-fifth of Kislev and lasting for eight days.

Ḥanukkah gelt. Money given to children as Hanukkah gift.

Ḥanukkiah. Ḥanukkah candelabrum.

Kislev. Hebrew month in which Ḥanukkah begins.

Latkes. Potato pancakes, traditionally eaten on Hanukkah.

Maoz Tzur. "Rock of Ages." Popular hymn sung on Hanukkah.

Nun, Gimel, Hay, and Shin. Hebrew letters on the dreidel. They stand for the Hebrew words *nes gadol hayah sham*, meaning "a great miracle happened there."

Shamash. Special "servant" candle used to light the other candles in the hanukkah.

Tevet. Hebrew month in which Hanukkah ends.

Purim

Adar. Hebrew month during which Purim occurs.

Ahasuerus. King of Persia involved in Purim story.

Esther. Wife of Ahasuerus and heroine of Purim story. The Scroll of Esther is read during the Purim service.

Feast of Lots. Another name for Purim.

Gragger (ra'a,shan in Hebrew). Noisemaker used during the Megillah reading to drown out Haman's name.

Hadassah. Esther's Hebrew name.

Haman. Prime minister of Ahasuerus. He tried to persuade king to permit pogrom against Persian Jews; instead, he was hung.

Hamantashen. Triangular pockets of dough filled with poppy seeds or jam served on Purim.

Matanot l'evyonim. Gifts to the poor on Purim.

Mordecai. Cousin of Esther and hero of Purim story.

Pur. Lot cast to determine one's fate. Name of holiday comes from the plural form, purim.

Seudah. Special feast associated with a holiday or Jewish life-cycle event.

Shushan. City where story of Purim took place.

Shushan Purim. The day after Purim (the fifteenth of Adar), ordained by the Jews in Persia's capital and in walled cities.

Ta'anit Esther. Fast of Esther, observed just before Purim from dawn to dusk, in commemoration of the fast Esther imposed on herself.

Vashti. King Ahasuerus' rebellious queen.

Passover

Afikoman. Piece of matzah hidden at beginning of Seder, to be found by the children.

Bedikat Hametz. Search for unleavened bread on night before Passover.

Beitzah. Roasted egg on Seder plate, a symbol of life.

Biur Hametz. Burning of hametz on morning before Passover.

Four Questions. Questions asked by youngest child during early part of Seder.

Had Gadya. "One kid." A favorite Seder song.

Haggadah. Book used at Seder service.

Hametz. Foods containing leavened grains; forbidden on Passover.

Haroset. Mixture of apples, cinnamon, nuts, and wine served on Passover, symbolizing mortar used to make bricks in Egypt.

Karpas. Greens (usually parsley) on Seder plate, symbolizing spring. Some people use potatoes for karpas.

Mah Nishtanah. Opening words of Four Questions.

Ma-ot Hittim. Special matzah fund used to help needy before Passover.

Maror. Bitter herbs, usually horseradish, served at Passover Seder.

Matzah. Unleavened bread eaten during Passover.

Moadim Lesimḥah. "Joyous festival." Festival greeting.

Nisan. Month when Exodus from Egypt took place. Passover begins on fourteen of Nisan.

Seder. Festive meal and ceremony held on first two nights of Passover (first night only in Israel and for Reform Jews).

Zeroa. Roasted lamb shankbone symbolizing Passover sacrifice in ancient Temple.

Shavuot

Akdamut. Special liturgical poem read during Shavuot services.

Bikkurim. First fruits brought to Temple as Shavuot offering.

Blintz. Thin crepe-like pancake filled with cottage cheese or fruit. Often served on Shavuot.

Feast of Weeks. Another name for Shavuot.

Sivan. Hebrew month in which Shavuot occurs.

Tikkun Leil Shavuot. Study session on night of Shavuot.

Jewish Food Terms

Beitzah. Roasted egg on Seder plate, a symbol of life.

Blintz. Thin crepe-like pancake filled with cottage cheese or fruit. Often served on Shavuot.

Borsht. Beet soup often served with sour cream or boiled potato.

Hallah. Braided bread used on Sabbaths and festivals.

Fleishig (Yiddish). Foods prepared with meat or meat products; in accordance with the dietary laws, they may not be eaten with dairy (milchig) foods.

Gefilte fish. Stuffed fish, often served as first course of Sabbath or holiday meal.

Hametz. Foods containing leavened grains; forbidden on Passover.

Haroset. Mixture of apples, cinnamon, nuts, and wine served on Passover, symbolizing mortar used to make bricks in Egypt.

Hamantashen. Triangular pockets of dough filled with poppy seeds or jam served on Purim.

Karpas. Greens (usually parsley) on Seder plate, symbolizing spring. Some people use potatoes for karpas.

Kneidel. Matzah-meal dumpling, often added to chicken broth. Sometimes called matzah ball.

Kosher. Refers to foods that are fit to be eaten according to Jewish dietary laws.

Kreplach. Triangular dumplings often filled with meat and served with soup.

Kugel. Noodle or potato pudding.

Latke (*levivah* in Hebrew). Potato pancake, traditionally eaten on Hanukkah.

Maror. Bitter herbs, usually horseradish, served at Passover Seder.

Matzah. Unleavened bread eaten during Passover.

Milchig (Yiddish). Foods prepared with milk or other dairy products; in accordance with dietary laws, they may not be eaten with, or immediately after, meat (fleishig) foods.

Pareve (Yiddish). Foods that are neither fleishig nor milchig but neutral according to dietary laws; e.g., fruits and vegetables.

Zeroa. Roasted lamb shankbone symbolizing Passover sacrifice in ancient Temple.

Life-cycle Terms

Birth And Education

Bar Mitzvah (masc.), *Bat Mitzvah* (fem). One who is responsible for observing the mitzvot (religious commandments). For boys this occurs at age thirteen, for girls at age twelve. Some egalitarian synagogues observe age 13 for both genders.

BritMilah. Circumcision ceremony occurring on eighth day after birth of Jewish boy.

Confirmation. Ceremony often tied to Shavuot in which teenagers confirm their acceptance of Judaism.

Kohen. Descendant of the ancient priestly tribe. Conducts Pidyon HaBen ceremony for firstborn and receives honor of first aliyah at services.

Kvater (masc.), *Kvaterin* (fern.). Godfather and godmother, appointed at time of circumcision.

Mohel (masc.), *Mohelet* (fem.). Person who performs surgery during ritual circumcision.

Pidyon HaBen. Ceremony for redemption of firstborn.

Sandek. Person who holds child at ritual circumcision.

Simhat Bat. Naming ceremony of newborn Jewish girl.

Shalom Zakhar/Shalom Nekeivah. Ceremony welcoming newborn Jewish child (boy or girl), often held on first Friday evening after birth.

Marriage

Aufruf. Calling of the groom-to-be (and often of bride-to-be) to Torah on Shabbat before wedding day.

Badeken. Ceremony for veiling bride.

Erusin. Betrothal.

Get. Religious divorce, required to terminate a Jewish marriage.

Hatan. Groom.

Huppah. Wedding canopy under which bride and groom stand during wedding ceremony. May consist of a tallit (prayer-shawl) and poles.

Kallah. Bride.

Ketubah. Marriage contract.

Kiddushin. Wedding.

Mikvah. Ritual bath.

Nesuin. Marriage.

Shadkhan. Jewish match-maker.

Sheva Berakhot. Seven wedding blessings.

Tenaim. Stipulations concerning proposed marriage.

Yihud. "Unchaperoned togetherness"; time when bride and groom are together and alone immediately following wedding ceremony.

Death And Mourning

Alav Hashalom. Hebrew for "May he rest in peace."

Aleha Hashalom. Hebrew for "May she rest in peace."

Eil Malei. Prayer for peace of departed soul.

Hevra Kaddisha. "Holy Society," group responsible for preparing body for burial.

Keriah. Tearing of garment as sign of mourning.

Mourner's Kaddish. Traditional prayer affirming life, recited by mourners.

Onen. Designation of mourner prior to funeral; as onen, one is exempted from the performance of religious obligations.

Sheloshim. First thirty days of mourning period.

Shivah. "Seven." First seven days of mourning.

Taharah. Ritual cleansing of deceased by Hevra Kaddisha prior to funeral.

Unveiling. Service marking consecration of tombstone.

Yahrzeit. Anniversary of death.

Yizkor. Memorial prayers recited on Shemini Atzeret, Passover, Shavuot, and Yom Kippur.

GENERAL TERMS

Ashkenazim. Jews who follow traditions of northern and central Europe.

Aveirah. Transgression of God's law.

Barukh Hashem. "May God be blessed." Expression having effect of "Thank God, I'm fine" in response to polite inquiries such as "How are you?"

Bet Din. Court of Jewish law.

Bikkur Ḥolim. Visiting the sick, an important religious obligation.

B'nai Yisrael. "Children of Israel." The Jewish people.

Codes. Books of Jewish law.

Eretz Yisrael. The land of Israel.

Galut. Dispersion of Jews throughout the world. Also called Diaspora.

Gemara. Major rabbinic commentary on the Mishnah, the major part of the Talmud.

Ger. A convert.

Ḥalakhah. Jewish law.

Hatikvah. "The Hope." Israel's national anthem.

Ḥevra. A fellowship of friends.

Ḥutzpah. Audacity, nerve.

Kashrut. The Jewish dietary laws.

Klezmer. Eastern European instrumental music.

Leḥayim. "To Life." Toast offered before drinking wine or liquor.

Mazal tov. Expression meaning "good luck" or "congratulations."

Mentsch (Yiddish). A decent, admirable person.

Mishnah. First postbiblical code of Jewish law, elaborated upon by Gemara.

Mitzvah. A religious commandment. Judaism has 613 of them.

Naches. Joy, often from children and grandchildren.

Pushke. Tzedakah container in which coins are placed for charity.

Rabbinical Assembly. International professional organization of Conservative rabbis.

Responsa. Formal written replies to questions on Jewish law by qualified legal authorities.

Rosh Hodesh. Beginning of new Jewish month.

Sephardim. Jews who follow traditions which originated in Spain and North Africa.

Shalom Bayit. Family harmony.

Shulḥan Arukh. Authoritative Code of Jewish Law written by Joseph Caro (sixteenth century).

Simḥah. Joyous occasion often associated with a life-cycle event, e.g., a Bar/Bat Mitzvah or a wedding.

Talmud. Compendium of Jewish law, consisting of Mishnah and Gemara.

Tanakh. The Bible, consisting of the Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

Torah. (1) The Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). (2) The scroll kept in the ark from which a portion is read at services each week.

Tzaddik. A righteous person.

Tzedakah. Deeds of kindness (charity).

Yarmulke (*kippah* in Hebrew). Skullcap.

Yom Tov. Festival.

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