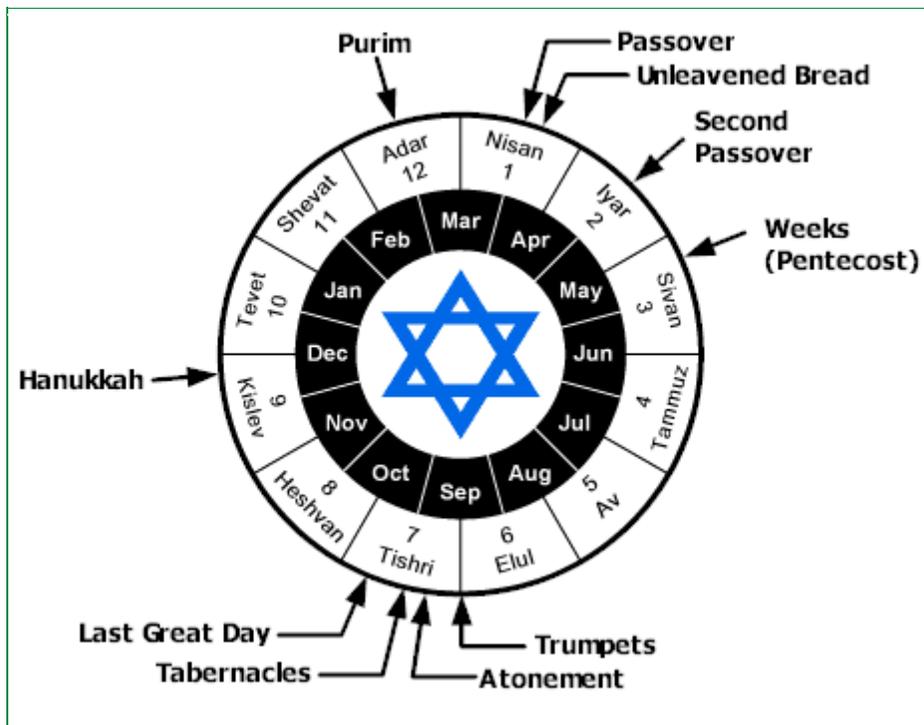# The Jewish Calendar and Sacred Festivals

The Jewish Calendar

The Jewish calendar is primarily lunar, with each month beginning on the new moon. An ordinary (non-leap) year has 12 months and about 354 days. Since 12 months are about 11 days shorter than a solar year, a leap month is added about every 3 years to keep the calendar in tune with the seasons. The first month of the religious calendar is the month of Nisan. But the Jewish civil New Year is in Tishri, the seventh month.

The 12 months of an ordinary year totaled to 353, 354, or 355 days. A leap year has 383, 384, or 385 days. The three lengths of the years are called *deficient*, *regular*, and *complete*, respectively. The Jewish calendar now has complex rules to determine the length of a year (visit http://webexhibits.org/calendars/calendar-jewish.html for more information). But in ancient times, the beginning of a month was determined by observation. When people observed the new moon, they would notify the Sanhedrin (an assembly of religious leaders). When the Sanhedrin heard testimony from two independent, reliable eyewitnesses that the new moon had occurred, they would declare the beginning of a new month and send out messengers to tell people when the month began.

The Sacred Festivals

In the Torah (the first five books of Moses), there were seven sacred festivals instituted by God:

1. The Feast of Passover (Pesach) - celebrated the night when the angel passed over the Hebrew households in Egypt.
2. The Feast of Unleavened Bread - commemorated the first 7 days of the Exodus when the Hebrews left Egypt in such a hurry that they did not have time to add yeast to their dough.
3. The Feast of Weeks - also called the Pentecost (Shavuot). It marked the end of the harvest and offering of first fruits.

4. The Feast of Trumpets (Yom Teruah) - the blowing of a ram's horn, or shofar, to call the people to prepare for the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Later this day became the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah).
5. The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) - the most solemn day of the year. On this day, the High Priest sacrificed sin offerings to atone all the sins of the people and entered the Most Holy Place to offer incense.
6. The Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot) - celebrated the completion of the great fall harvest and remembered the Hebrews in the Exodus living in tents for 40 years.
7. The Feast of the Last Great Day (Shmini Atzeret) - marked the conclusion of the festival year.

Of the above, three were considered as "major feasts": the Feast of Passover (Pesach), the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), and the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). These are often called "pilgrim feasts" because all adult males were required to travel to the sanctuary to take part (Deuteronomy 16:16).

Civil Holidays

At a much later time two more civil holidays were introduced:

1. Purim - celebrated God's deliverance of His people through a beautiful woman called Esther. The book of Esther tells the story.
2. The Festival of Lights (Hanukkah) - commemorated the historic victory of a small band of Maccabees over the ruling Syrian-Greek regime.

Other Holy Days

In addition to the above festivals, the followings were to be observed:

1. Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11; Numbers 28:9-10; Deuteronomy 5:12-15) - Sabbath, which was observed on the 7th day, was the earliest and the most observed holy day. It remembered God's seventh day of rest at creation and also the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. It was observed by rest and strict cessation from work from sunset until sunset. An additional two lambs were required on this day for sacrifice.
2. New Moon (Numbers 10:10; 28:11-15) - Each new moon was observed by blowing of trumpets and additional special offerings.
3. Sabbatical year (Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7; Deuteronomy 15:1-11) - After the Israelites entered Canaan they were to leave the fields unseeded and the vineyards unpruned every 7 years. In sabbatical year, the natural or spontaneous yield of the soil were to be shared with the poor, the servants, and the strangers. Debts for fellow Israelites were to be forgiven and all Hebrew slaves were to be freed.
4. Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-55; 27:16-25) - After 7 observances of the Sabbatical year, i.e. after 49 years, on the 50th year, came the year of jubilee. During it the land was left uncultivated, making two sabbatical years in succession (49th and 50th year). God promised sufficient yield in the preceding 6 years for maintenance during the following three years until the land yielded crops again. Ancestral properties were to be returned to the original owners or their legal heirs, and all Hebrew slaves were to be freed.

Table of Jewish Calendar and Festivals

The following table summarizes the Jewish calendar and the sacred festivals. All Jewish holidays begin the evening before the date specified. This is because a Jewish day begins and ends at sunset, rather than at midnight.

Jewish Calendar	Length in a deficient year	Length in a regular year	Length in a complete year	Festivals and Holidays	Gregorian Calendar
1 NISAN	30	30	30	**14 evening.** Passover (Pesach) **15-21.** The Feast of Unleavened Bread	**March**
					April
2 IYAR	29	29	29	**14.** Second Passover (Pesach Sheni)	

Month					
3 SIVAN	30	30	30	**6.** Weeks (Shavuot)	**May**
4 TAMMUZ	29	29	29		**June**
5 AV	30	30	30		**July**
6 ELUL	29	29	29		**August**
7 TISHRI	30	30	30	**1.** Trumpets (Yom Teruah) **10.** The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) **15-21.** Tabernacles (Sukkot) **22.** Last Great Day (Shmini Atzeret)	**September**
8 HESHVAN	29	29	30		**October**
9 KISLEV	29	30	30	**25 - 2 Tevet.** The Festival of Lights (Hanukkah)	**November**
10 TEVET	29	29	29		**December**
11 SHEVAT	30	30	30		**January**
12 ADAR I*	30 (leap year only)	30 (leap year only)	30 (leap year only)		**February**
13 ADAR II	29	29	29	**14.** Purim	**March**
Total	353 or 383 (leap year)	354 or 384 (leap year)	355 or 385 (leap year)		

* The month Adar I is present only in leap years. In an ordinary year, Adar II is simply called Adar.

Jewish Calendar Online Tools

- Hebcal Interactive Jewish Calendar
  Allows you to specify any year from 1 - 9999 AD. Complete with holidays and candle-lighting times.
- Hebrew Calendar - Jewish Calendar and Converter on the web
  Converts dates from Jewish to Gregorian, or vice versa.

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