

Appendix 4

Explanation of Jewish Festivals

The following information is intended to assist those not so familiar with Jewish festivals and customs, particularly when assisting with reaching agreements between parents to share these very special occasions with their children. On Shabbat which occurs each week and also on the majority of Jewish festivals Jews are not permitted to work or undertake any labour (which extends to operating electrical devices including a television, a computer and light switches), carry or travel either by car or public transport, apart from walking. They will instead visit Synagogue to celebrate these events with their children and family. Often part of the festival includes the preparations before and afterwards which are also important for children to be able to experience with both parents and extended families.

These rules are, however, complex and are observed by individual Jewish people to different levels.

■ **Shabbat**

The seventh day of the week is Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, which stretches from sunset on Friday until one hour after sunset on Saturday. Shabbat is a day on which Jews mirror G-d's own rest after creating the world. It is a very important time for the family each week to spend time with each other and share the many activities associated with Shabbat.

■ **Barmitzvahs, Batmitzvahs/Bat Chayils**

The Barmitzvah and Batmitzvah/Bat Chayil are a "rite of passage," a crossover from childhood to adulthood; a milestone in a Jewish life. Orthodox Judaism deems a boy a "Barmitzvah" when he turns 13 and a girl becomes "Batmitzvah/Bat Chayil" when she turns 12. Reform and Liberal Judaism celebrate both boys' and girls' coming of age on their 13th birthday. At that point the child, who is no longer a child in the eyes of Jewish law, becomes responsible for his own deeds, spiritually, ethically, and morally. This coming of age is usually celebrated with family and friends in Synagogue with the child's involvement in the service, with boys in Orthodox congregations, reading a learned portion of the Torah (five books of Moses known as the Jewish written law and comprising the first five books of the Old Testament)

they have learnt. In Liberal and Reform congregations girls also read from the Torah. It is usual for family celebrations to follow afterwards.

■ **Kabbalat Torah**

Kabbalat Torah is a firmly established religious observance in Liberal Judaism. The ceremony of Kabbalat Torah at age 15 allows girls and boys to affirm their commitment to Judaism as a consequence of a personal decision and runs from Bar and Batmitzvah, culminating in the ceremony created jointly by the students and the Rabbis.

In the following paragraphs, explanations of Jewish festivals are given in the order in which they occur during the secular calendar, starting in January.

■ **Tu B'Shvat**

This festival occurs around January or February each year. It is known as the "New Year for Trees" and involves planting trees and celebrating their importance. On Tu B'Shvat Jews often eat fruits associated with the Holy Land, especially the ones mentioned in the Torah.

■ **Purim**

This festival occurs around February or March each year. Purim commemorates the time when the Jewish people living in Persia were saved from extermination by the courage of a young Jewish woman called Esther. It is customary to hold carnival-like celebrations on Purim, to perform plays and parodies. The main commandment related to Purim is to hear the reading of the Book of Esther in Synagogue. The Book of Esther is known as the Megillah, which means scroll. Children in particular enjoy dressing up as the characters found in the Book of Esther, including King Achashverosh, Vashti, Queen Esther, Mordecai and Haman.

■ **Pesach (Passover)**

This festival occurs around March or April each year. Passover is one of the most important religious festivals in the Jewish calendar. Jews celebrate the Feast of Passover to commemorate the liberation of the Children of Israel who were led out of Egypt by Moses. The festival lasts eight days for Orthodox Jews outside Israel with the first two and last two days being days on which services are held at the synagogue. Reform and Liberal Jews celebrate Pesach for seven days. As for Shabbat, Jews are expected to rest. On the evening before the first two days, a special service called a Seder ('Order') takes place

over a meal around a table in a home. Traditionally at the beginning of the Seder the youngest child present asks four important questions about why Jews eat matzah (unleavened bread) during this festival and bitter herbs as part of the Seder.

■ **Lag B'Omer**

This festival occurs around May each year. Thirty three days following the first day of Passover, Jews celebrate Lag B'Omer. It is celebrated to commemorate the day a plague ended during which thousands of students of Rabbi Akiba, a Talmudic scholar, died during the Counting of the Omer. The period of counting is traditionally observed as a period of mourning. The mourning, however, is set aside on Lag B'Omer, making it day of special joy and festivity. Families often go on picnics and outings and also enjoy bonfires to celebrate this festival.

■ **Shavuot (Feast of Weeks)**

This festival occurs around June each year and takes place fifty days after the first day of Passover. Orthodox Jews observe Shavuot for two days. Reform and Liberal Jews observe Shavuot for one day. Shavuot marks the time that the Jews received the Torah on Mount Sinai. It is considered a highly important historical and religious event. Prayers are said on Shavuot to thank G-d for the Torah and for His Law. Some people also spend the first night of Shavuot studying the Torah. Dairy products such as cheesecake are also eaten during Shavuot.

■ **Tisha B'Av (9th day of Av)**

This fast day occurs around July or August each year. It is a solemn occasion because it commemorates a series of tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people over the years, many of which have coincidentally happened on this day including the destruction of the Temples. Tisha B'Av is observed with prayers and fasting.

■ **Rosh Hashanah (New Year)**

This festival occurs around September each year. Rosh Hashanah (literally 'Head of the Year') is observed by Orthodox Jews for two days whereas it is observed by most Reform and Liberal Jews for one day. A great deal of time is spent in Synagogue during Rosh Hashanah. People will reflect on their actions over the past year and ask for forgiveness for their sins. The central feature of the Rosh Hashanah services is the blowing of the shofar, a ram's

horn. The sound was heard on many important occasions in Biblical times. The sound of the shofar starts a ten-day period known as Yamin Noraim (literally 'Days of Awe'), which ends with the solemn fast day of Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is not only celebrated in the synagogue, but at home too. A special meal is served, with the emphasis on sweetness. Apples are dipped in honey, as a symbol of the sweet New Year that each Jew hopes lies ahead.

■ **Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)**

This Holy day occurs in September or October each year. Yom Kippur is the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar. It means 'Day of Atonement' and is a day on which Jewish people reflect on the past year and ask for G-d's forgiveness for any sins. They fast for 25 hours taking neither food nor water from sunset to one hour after sunset on the following evening. Everyone who is fasting eats a meal before the fast begins. Boys under thirteen and girls under twelve do not have to fast. The day is spent in continuous prayer in Synagogue and the single sound of the shofar marks the end of the holy day.

■ **Succot (Festival of Tabernacles or Booths)**

This festival occurs around October each year and comes five days after Yom Kippur. Succot is also known as the 'Feast of Tabernacles'. Succot commemorates the years that the Jews spent in the desert on their way to the Promised Land, and celebrates the way in which G-d protected them under difficult desert conditions. The word Succot means huts and a Jewish family will build an open air temporary structure or Sukkah with a roof of branches and leaves in which to live during this holiday. In the UK because of our climate the tradition is that meals are usually eaten in the Sukkah. A palm branch and some leaves of myrtle and willow (Lulav) and a citron fruit (Etrog) are symbolically part of the festival as a reminder of G-d blessing our survival during the coming dark days of winter. This festival is a happy holiday which children particularly enjoy and help to build the Sukkah.

■ **Shemini Atzeret/ Simchat Torah (Rejoicing of the Law)**

These festivals occur around October each year. Shemini Atzeret can be translated as "the assembly of the eighth (day)." This holiday is celebrated on the eighth day of Succot in the UK. The major custom is the reading of the special prayer for rain.

The holiday of Simchat Torah celebrates both the completion and beginning of the reading of the Torah. Simcha means rejoicing and thus Jews rejoice the

ending and beginning of the Torah. In Synagogue once the Ark is opened and all the Torah scrolls have been taken out, everybody in the synagogue is given an opportunity to dance with them. There are two traditions associated with the festival. One is the distribution of sweets and apples to the children who follow the scrolls with flags. Orthodox Jews observe these festivals on consecutive days whereas Liberal Jews observe both festivals together on the last day of Succot.

■ **Chanukah (Festival of Lights)**

This festival occurs in December each year. Chanukah is the Jewish Festival of Lights and is celebrated for eight days. The festival marks the phenomenal victory of a group of Jews called the Maccabees over the Syrian Greeks, the most powerful army of the ancient world. At the end of the three-year war, the Maccabees recaptured Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple. When the Maccabees rededicated the Temple, they discovered a single vessel of oil with the seal of the High Priest still intact. This lasted for eight days in the Temple rather than the anticipated one day. This became known as the miracle of the oil. Jews light the Chanukiah (an eight branched candlestick which has a ninth branch for the "Servant" (Shammash or lighting candle) on each of the eight evenings of this festival, an additional candle being lit each night until all candles burn together on the eighth night. Chanukah is a special time for children. Gifts and Chanukah money are exchanged. Some families give a small present on each of the eight nights of Chanukah. Children and adults play with a spinning top called a dreidel. Some foods have a special significance, such as latkes (a kind of potato fritter), pancakes and doughnuts. This is because they are fried in oil and so Jewish people remember the miracle of the oil lasting eight days in the Temple.

■ **Funerals, Evening Prayers and Stone Settings**

A funeral, sometimes referred to as Levoya, is a ceremony held at the burial ground. Children may attend but it is up to their parents to decide if it is best for them to do so. Because Jewish custom is to bury the deceased person quickly, funerals may occur with virtually no notice and therefore separated parents should permit "lapses" in parenting plans to occur on such solemn occasions.

Evening prayers, sometimes referred to as a Shiva, are prayers held for up to a week during the first week after the funeral, where people pay their respect to family members or close family friends. School age children may attend.

Stone settings, or grave stone consecrations, are usually held about one year after the funeral. These are also important family events where respect is paid to a family member or close family friend who has passed away.