



# Glossary of Jewish terms

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**Aliyah** Literally means “ascent” but has come to mean the act of emigrating to Israel. Someone who moves to Israel is said to “make Aliyah”.

**Anti-Semitism/antisemitism** Prejudice, hatred and discrimination against Jews. Some prefer the second spelling.

**Ashkenazi** Jews of pre-war French, German, and eastern European descent. Ashkenazic Jews are more commonly described as being “Ashkenazi” (pronounced *ash-ka-nar-see*).

**Auschwitz-Birkenau** Largest of the Nazi concentration camps.

**Bar/Bat mitzvah** Ceremony for a Jewish young person held at the age of 13 (sometimes 12 for a girl) to mark their coming of age, usually involving reading from the Torah. For a boy it is known as a bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah for a girl. Most Orthodox Jews do not hold bat mitzvahs, although some do, with some alterations to the ritual.

**Bat Chayil** Ceremony held in some orthodox Jewish communities for a Jewish girl of 12 to commemorate her coming of age.

**Beth Din** Jewish court in which three rabbinic judges preside over disputes in Jewish law. For instance, if a Jewish restaurant is accused of selling non-kosher food, the dispute may be settled in the Beth Din.

**Blood libel** Accusation that Jewish people used the blood of Christians in religious rituals, especially in the preparation of Passover bread, that was perpetrated throughout the Middle Ages and (sporadically) until the early 20th century.

**Challah** Sweetened bread, usually braided, the blessing and eating of which forms part of some time-based Jewish rituals, most importantly the start of Shabbat.

**Chanukah** Festival commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem at the time of the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire, also known as “the Festival of Lights”. Pronounced *ha-new-ka*.

**Chief Rabbi** Title given in several countries and cities to the religious leader of that country’s Jewish community. Not all sections of Jewish communities recognise the authority of the Chief Rabbi.

**Chuppah** Canopy under which a Jewish bride and groom get married. Pronounced *hoo-paa*.

**Diaspora** Jews who do not live in Israel. The Diaspora developed after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 587BCE, and accelerated following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70CE.

**Friday night dinner** Many Jewish families traditionally eat dinner together on a Friday night to mark the beginning of Shabbat. This usually involves the ritual blessing over bread (often challah) and wine, plus the lighting of candles.

**Frum** Colloquial Yiddish adjective used to describe religious Jews.

**Frummer** Colloquial term for religious Jews, sometimes used pejoratively.

**Gentile** A non-Jew.

**Goy** Hebrew term for a gentile. Although the term simply means “nation” in the Bible, it sometimes has pejorative connotations today.

**G-d** Out of religious observance, some Jews do not write the name of the Lord, instead replacing the “o” with a dash.

**Haredi** Sometimes known as strictly orthodox or ultra-orthodox, Haredi Jews are those who follow a strict interpretation of Jewish law and minimise their interaction with secular society and education. The men are often identifiable by their long black coats, black hats, beards and sometimes sidelocks. Women dress modestly and cover their hair with wigs, hats or headscarves. Haredi Judaism has two main streams: Hasidic (itself divided into multiple sects) and Mitnagdim/Lithuanian.

**Hasidism/Hasid/Hasidic** Hasidism emerged in 18th-century eastern Europe as a revivalist movement, focusing on spirituality in prayer and Jewish practice. While today elements of Hasidism are influential in Jewish thought and across the Jewish spectrum, a “Hasidic Jew” is generally understood to be someone who is part of the Haredi Jewish community. There are multiple Hasidic sects that follow the authority of a particular rabbi or “rebbe”.

**Hebrew** Semitic language of the Hebrews, in its biblical or modern form. Modern Hebrew, as revived by the Zionist movement in the late 19th century, differs significantly from biblical Hebrew. Hebrew is the main language of prayer and other religious texts, although Aramaic (a related Semitic language) is also used.

**High holidays or high holy days** These refer to the most sacred days in the Jewish calendar, namely Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and the days between them.

**Holocaust** The genocide of six million Jews between 1939 and 1945.

**Holocaust Memorial Day** International annual commemoration on 27 January of the six million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust.

**IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism** A definition of antisemitism, written by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which is recognised by many governments around the world.

**Intermarriage** When a Jew marries another Jew, they are sometimes said to be “marrying in”. When a Jew marries a non-Jew, they are said to be “marrying out”. These terms are sometimes seen as pejorative by Jews who seek to destigmatise intermarriage.

**International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)** Organisation that unites governments and experts to strengthen, advance and promote Holocaust education, research and remembrance.

**Israel** The Jewish State of Israel, which declared independence in 1948.

**Israeli Independence Day** Known as Yom Ha’atzmaut, this day commemorates the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948. It is a public holiday in Israel and is also commemorated in Diaspora communities.

**Ivrit** The modern Hebrew language.

**Kabbalah** The esoteric tradition of Jewish mysticism. At one stage study of this tradition was highly restricted, but elements of it are now studied across the Jewish spectrum.

**Kashrut** The system of Jewish dietary laws that define which foods are kosher. This includes prohibitions on particular foods as well as specific rules for animal slaughter. Kashrut is enforced by a number of supervisory authorities and most orthodox Jews will not eat in establishments that are not inspected by one of them.

**Kindertransport** Informal name of a series of rescue efforts that brought thousands of refugee Jewish children to Great Britain from Nazi Germany between 1938 and 1940.

**Kippah**, or a **yarmulke**, or **kuppel** Brimless skullcap that Jewish men wear to show their observance to God. Most male Jews wear it during prayer and orthodox men will wear it at all times. In some non-orthodox traditions, women also wear it during prayer.

**Kosher** Term used to describe food that is fit for eating under kashrut, the system of Jewish dietary law.

**Kristallnacht** “The Night of Broken Glass” took place, on 9 November 1938, when Nazi stormtroopers and civilians torched synagogues, Jewish homes, schools and businesses throughout Germany.

**Law of Return** Legislation granting every Jew in the world the right to settle in Israel.

**L’chaim!** Jewish toast that means “To life!”

**Liberal Judaism** In the UK this refers to a particular denomination that is separate from, but now closely related to, the Reform Judaism denomination. In other countries, the term Liberal Judaism is used rather than Reform Judaism.

**Lubavitch**, also known as **Chabad** or **Habad** Hasidic/Haredi/strictly orthodox movement or sect. Unlike most other Haredi sects, Lubavitch conducts outreach to non-orthodox Jews and runs “Habad houses” across the world. Lubavitch reveres its seventh rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who died in 1994.

**Magen David Adom** Red Shield of David, the Jewish version of the Red Cross.

**Matzah** Thin, crisp unleavened bread, traditionally eaten by Jews during Pesach/Passover to commemorate the Jews having no time to wait for their bread to rise during the escape from Egypt.

**Mezuzah** Parchment containing passages from the Torah that is affixed to the door post of Jewish homes.

**Minyan** Quorum of 10 men (or men and women, in some synagogues) over the age of 13 required for traditional Jewish public worship.

**Mitzvah** A religious obligation. In some Jewish contexts the term has become synonymous with a good deed.

**Mitzvah Day** Annual day of faith-based social action that takes place in November, predominantly in the UK.

**Mizrachi** Jews come from Middle Eastern backgrounds, including Iraq, Syria and Egypt. The large Jewish populations in these areas were expelled to or emigrated to Israel in the years following independence in 1948. Some Mizrachi Jews still speak Arabic and there are Mizrachi populations in many Diaspora countries, including the UK.

**Mount Sinai** Summit in Egypt where Moses was said to receive the Ten Commandments.

**Nuremberg Laws** Antisemitic laws used to persecute Jewish people in Nazi Germany.

**Nuremberg trials** The court trials of the Nazi leaders after the Second World War, mainly for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

**Orthodoxy** The term for Jews who hold to the traditionalist conception of Jewish law: that it was divinely given to Moses on Mount Sinai and its laws are eternally binding. Today, there are differences among orthodox Jews as to the degree of interaction and accommodation possible to the secular world. Those who believe that full participation in modern life is possible are sometimes known as modern orthodox. Those that try to limit participation as much as possible are known as Haredi or strictly orthodox.

**Payot** Sidelocks worn by some Hasidic men.

**Pesach** or **Passover** Spring festival that commemorates the story of the Israelites' departure from ancient Egypt.

**Pogroms** Organised massacre of a particular ethnic group, in particular Jews in Russia or eastern Europe.

**Protocols of the Elders of Zion** Antisemitic hoax pamphlet published in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, still circulated today, which claims to be an account of the plans of Jewish elders to control the world.

**Rabbi** A Jewish religious leader. Traditionally, a rabbi is a teacher of Torah who is qualified to make decisions in Jewish law, and has no priestly function. However, rabbis today may carry out a much wider range of functions, including leading synagogue services. In non-orthodox denominations, rabbis may be male or female.

**Rebbe** Another word for rabbi, but most usually applied to the spiritual leader of a Hasidic sect.

**Reform Judaism** Movement that began in Germany and the US in the 19th century that seeks to adapt Judaism to contemporary circumstances, arguing for the mutability of Jewish law, often emphasising ethics and spirituality over ritual and observance. In recent decades, Reform Judaism has emphasised gender equality and women play an equal part in worship. In the UK, there are two movements that derive from this tradition: Reform Judaism and Liberal Judaism. Historically, Liberal Judaism has been more theologically radical.

**The Righteous among the Nations** People who have been honoured by Israel's Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem for saving Jews during the Holocaust.

**Rosh Hashanah** Jewish New Year, held in the autumn.

**Sephardi** Jews are the Jews of Spain and Portugal and their descendants. After expulsion from Spain and Portugal in 1492, they established communities in North Africa, the Balkans, western Europe and elsewhere. Sephardi Jews are more commonly described as being "Sephardi" (pronounced *sa-far-dee*).

**Shabbat** The Jewish Sabbath. Because the Jewish calendar works according to the movements of the Moon, not the Sun, Shabbat (or Shabbas) is observed from sundown on Friday night to sundown on Saturday night. There are special synagogue services and home-based rituals to mark Shabbat. Traditionally, Jews are bound by multiple restrictions about working on Shabbat, including not turning on lights or driving.

**The Shoah** Another term for the Holocaust, from the Hebrew term for "destruction" or "catastrophe".

**Shul** Yiddish term for synagogue. The term is used ubiquitously in the UK Jewish community.

**Star of David** Six-pointed figure comprising two interlaced equilateral triangles, used as a Jewish and Israeli symbol.

**Sukkot** Festival that celebrates the gathering of the harvest and commemorates the miraculous protection provided for the children of Israel when they left Egypt. Held in the autumn, Jews traditionally mark the festival by the building and habitation of temporary booths, or huts.

**Synagogue** Building where a Jewish assembly or congregation meets for religious worship and study. Today synagogues also carry out multiple functions, including welfare, youth clubs and social activities.

**Tallit** Shawls worn in prayer by men in the orthodox tradition and by men and women in most non-orthodox traditions.

**Talmud** The volumes of legal and theological discussions and commentaries, collated by about 500CE. It contains two principal components, the Mishnah (collated about 200CE) and the much larger Gemara, which builds on the Mishnah. The Talmud is written in Hebrew and Aramaic, although English translations are now available. Traditionally, the Talmud has equal status to the Torah and is known as the “Oral Torah”, as it is viewed of having been given on Mount Sinai to Moses alongside the written Torah. The Talmud is the basis of much of the canon of Jewish law.

**Temple** In ancient times, Judaism was principally centred on animal sacrifices and other rituals carried out by the priestly caste at the temple in Jerusalem. There were two temples, the first destroyed in 587BCE, and the second destroyed in 70CE. Today, in the US and some other Jewish communities (but not in the UK), temple is used as a term for a Reform synagogue.

**Torah** Literally “teaching”, Torah can mean both the entire canon of Jewish traditional texts, and, more specifically, the first five books of the Bible. In the latter case, the Torah continues to be handwritten on parchment scrolls and read from weekly in the synagogue.

**Tsitsit** Knotted fringes or tassels worn on the fringes of both the tallit worn in prayer and on the tallit worn under clothes by orthodox Jewish men.

**United Synagogue** The principal modern orthodox synagogue movement in the UK. The Chief Rabbi is its spiritual head.

**Yad Vashem** Israel’s Holocaust memorial, archive and museum.

**Yiddish** A Germanic language that developed from the Middle Ages in central and eastern Europe. Although based on German it contains multiple loan words from Hebrew and other languages. The heartlands of Yiddish-speakers were devastated in the Holocaust and assimilation in many other countries (including the UK) meant that the language was often not passed down to the younger generation. However, Yiddish is still the dominant language within many Haredi communities and it is also spoken by secular Jewish revivalists.

**Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement** The holiest day of the year in Judaism. Its central themes are atonement and repentance. Jews traditionally observe this holy day with about 25 hours of fasting and intensive prayer, often spending most of the day in synagogue services.

**Zionism** The Jewish nationalist movement that emerged in the 19th century, calling for a Jewish nation state, for most but not all of its initial adherents, in what was then Palestine. It built on the traditional centrality of Israel in Jewish theology and the desire to return from exile. Multiple streams of Zionism exist. Although initially Zionism was a predominantly secularist movement, forms of religious Zionism subsequently emerged and are today highly influential in Israel. Sections of the Haredi community and the secular Jewish left oppose Zionism.

**Zionist** A supporter of Zionism.

*NOTE There is no one standard way of transliterating Hebrew terms into English. In this glossary, the most common practices of transliteration have been followed, but users may encounter others. For example, Chanukah may sometimes be written as Hanukah. Note also that the Hebrew “t” is rendered “s” in some contexts. For example, the festival Simchat Torah may be known as Simchas Torah.*