

Explanation of terms, meaning of Hebrew words

The definitions of Jewish concepts below are primarily based on the encyclopaedia of religious life by Károly Jólesz (Károly Jólesz: Zsidó Hitéleti Kislexikon, Budapest, 1985).

Aliyah: “ascent”. The immigration to Eretz Yisrael, later to the State of Israel.

Bimah: pulpit, which is placed in the middle of the synagogue. It is used for reading the Torah and reciting certain prayers.

Boher: young Yeshiva student.

Dreidel: a four-sided spinning top which the children play with on the evenings of Hanukkah. (Cf: Hanukkah)

“Héder”: “room”. An undivided, single room used as a private school, where children can study for a tuition fee. Little children start learning the alef beth (Hebrew alphabet) and reading the prayer book from the age of 3-5, followed by the next level, learning the Torah (the Five Books of Moses), later with commentaries.

Hanukkah (Chanukah): “to dedicate”. It is a joyful festival commemorating that the Maccabees seized back the Holy Temple from the Syrian invaders and rededicated it. Even though they only found sacred oil enough for one day, due to a miracle the oil lasted for eight days.

Kabbalat Shabbat: “Reception of the Shabbat”. (Cf: Shabbat)

Kaddish: “holy prayer”, a prayer which praises God.

Kamenets-Podolsky: a place in the Ukraine, where interned Jewish people, who did not have Hungarian citizenship, were killed in 1941. There were about 18 000 of them.

Kashér and trefah (kosher and treif): clean and unclean. Kosher: “fit” from a ritual perspective (food, ritual object, anything), the opposite of which is treif: not suitable.

Kiddush: “sanctifying”, a ritual sanctifying the Shabbat and the holidays with wine and bread. Kiddush is often held on a Friday evening or Saturday morning at the synagogue as a community event.

Kol Nidre: “all vows”. Prayer chanted on the evening of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) for annulment of vows and pledges. (Cf: Yom Kippur)

Lulav (lulef): “palm branch”. One of the species in the bunch on the holiday of Sukkot. (Cf: Sukkot)

Ma Nishtana...? “Why is this night different...”? On Seder Night the small child in the family asks the questions of the Haggadah (the story of the Exodus from Egypt) in Aramaic. The above quoted question continues as follows: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” (Cf: Seder, Pesach)

Ma'oz Tzur Yeshu'ati: “My refuge, my rock of salvation”. A Hanukkah song. It is sung on the eight days of the holiday, after lighting the candles in the synagogues and at home. (Cf: Hanukkah)

Ma Tov: „O How Good”. Beginning of a morning prayer.

Matza: “unleavened bread”. Dough of just flour and water, there is nothing else added before baking to commemorate their ancestors, who fled from Egypt in a hurry and did not have the time to wait for the dough to rise before baking. (Cf: Pesach, Seder)

Mincha (or Minha): “afternoon prayer”. The name of the afternoon prayer to be recited daily.

Mitzvah: “commandment”. The Torah (the Five Books of Moses) contains 613 commandments. Originally, these are God’s commandments, later however the meaning became wider, and today it refers to all sorts of moral duties and worthy deeds.

Mezuzah: “doorpost”. Parchment placed into a wooden or metal case, which is nailed to the doorpost on the right hand side, with the top of it slanting inwards. The parchment contains verses from the Bible: Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verses 4-8, 11, 13-21. Religious Jewish people touch the mezuzah when eating and when leaving, and kiss their fingers. The purpose of the Mezuzah is to direct one’s thoughts to God and his laws.

Pesach (Passover): “feast of unleavened bread”. A festival commemorating the liberation from slavery in Egypt. It is forbidden to consume leavened foods. Returning from the synagogue, the Jewish people sit down to celebrate Seder. (Cf: Seder, Matzah)

Pesach dishes: kitchenware which is exclusively used at Pesach, not containing anything leavened. Before the holiday everything in the house has to be cleaned and made leaven-free. (Cf: Pesach)

Purim: “festival of fate”. A joyful holiday commemorating an incident described in the Book of Esther. During the Persian oppression the plot of the evil Haman against the Jews failed.

Rosh Hashanah: “new year”. The day of judgement for all the creatures of the world. This is when God decides what their destiny will be in the coming year.

Seder: “order”. The first night of Pesach, a family feast, which has its own, special order. The Haggadah Sel Pesach (the story of the Exodus from Egypt) was written to use at Seder, in order to keep the children interested in the past. (Cf: Pesach)

Sefer Torah: “Book(s) of Torah”. The Five Books of Moses written on parchment in scroll form. Torah writing is constrained by strict ritual rules. The scroll is only kosher (see above), if it does not contain any mistakes.

Siddur: “prayer book”. It contains the daily and Saturday prayers, as well as some other important ones.

Simhath Torah: “Rejoicing with the Torah”, comes after Sukkot (see below). It is the end of the one year cycle of the Torah reading and the beginning of the new cycle. On the eve of the holiday and in the morning of it there is a procession before reading the Torah, and the community sings and dances with the Torah in their hands.

Shabbat (Shabbos): “Saturday”. The seventh day of the week, which starts in the evening of Friday and lasts until the stars come up on Saturday evening. Just like God took a rest after six days, so should humans also sanctify the Saturday with rest and not do any type of work. (Exodus 20:8-11)

Shabbat Shuvah: “Shabbat of Return”. This is the name of the Saturday between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. (Cf: Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur)

Shaharit: “morning prayer service”

Sh'ma Yisreal: “Hear, O Israel”. This prayer encapsulates the essence of monotheistic Judaism, which is recited several times in the daily prayer schedule. (Deuteronomy 6:4)

Shoah: “disaster, annihilation”. (Yeshaya 10:3; Psalms 63:10 etc.) The Hebrew name for the Holocaust.

Shohet (shakter): the person who performs the ritual slaughter. Ritual slaughter is a command in the Torah, because it is the basis of kashrut (kosherness). The aim is for the animal to die the least painful death possible.

Sholet: a Saturday meal made of beans and meat. It is cooked before the Shabbat begins, on the day it is just re-heated. (Cf: Shabbat)

Shivah: “seven”. Sitting Shivah: mourning after a deceased for seven days, according to ritual rules.

Sukkah: “booth”. (Cf: Sukkot)

Sukkot: “feast of booths”. According to the commandment in the Torah, one has to live in a booth for seven days in memory of the ancestors who left Egypt, and who also lived in booths during their wandering in the desert. (Cf: Sukkah)

Talmud Torah: “Torah school”. Teaching the children is the parents’ duty, but also the responsibility of the community, this is why communities established Talmud Torah associations. The association paid for the poor children’s Hebrew tuition, or provided a free school for them. From the second half of the 19th Century, Talmud Torah refers to religious education outside the school. (Cf: Héder)

Trefah: “torn by a wild beast”. The Torah says: “do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts” (Exodus 22:31). Not suitable, not kosher, unclean food. Today this word is used for all forbidden foods, e.g. food which is a mix of dairy and meat . (Cf: Kosher)

Yeshiva (y'shivah): “sitting”. A higher school for teaching the Talmud.

Yom Kippur: “Day of Atonement”. On this day the book of life and death is open in front of the Eternal, and the fear of the sealing of his verdict pervades the mortals. During the festival, people spend 25 hours fasting and praying.