

Why do Jews celebrate the Passover?

The festival remembers the freeing of the Hebrew slaves (Jews) from Egypt.

Called Passover as the angel of death (at the tenth plague) 'passed over' the houses of the Hebrew slaves.

Main event is the Seder. At the Seder meal the father tells the children in the house the story of the exodus (where the Hebrews left Egypt).

The story of Seder is told through symbols on the Seder plate.

At Passover Jews do not eat bread made with yeast (hametz) – a reminder that the slaves did not have time to bake bread before they left Egypt.

During the Holocaust Jews tried to celebrate Passover but it was almost impossible to not eat hametz.

In the ghettos (overcrowded Jewish areas) and the camps it was impossible for Jews to gather together to tell the story of Passover (Haggadah).

In the camps, special prayers were said at Passover asking for God to forgive the Jews for eating hametz rather than matza (unrisen bread).

Passover is also known as the Festival of Freedom.

Even in the Holocaust the festival of freedom was celebrated (although the rules of the festival could not be kept).

In 1943 on the night before Passover a group of Jews decided to fight against the German Army – The Warsaw Uprising. They wanted freedom.

The festival kept the idea of freedom alive and gave many Jews hope for the future.

Why is the Bar Mitzvah important?

Bar mitzvah marks the moving from childhood to adulthood.

At Bar mitzvah the young man will put on religious dress (tefillin, kippur and tallit), read from the Torah Scroll in front of the Jewish Community.

Every boy at the age of 13 is thought to be responsible for his own actions and is then meant to keep all religious commandments (for girls it is when they are 12 years old).

At the Bar Mitzvah boys will be welcomed into the Minyan – this is the men who can pray together in the synagogue.

During the Holocaust many Jewish children were expected to live as adults; working, protecting others.

Very few children had Bar Mitzvah during the Holocaust.

In the camps, if birthdays were remembered, every effort was made to celebrate Bar Mitzvah.

In the ghettos, it was forbidden to wear tefillin, kippur and tallit. The punishment was 75 lashes.

Jewish prisoners, during the holocaust, often found abandoned tefillin, kippurs and tallits to use and prayer books to give as gifts.

Why do Jews celebrate Chanukah?

Chanukah remembers the battle between the Jews and the Greeks. The Jews won, meaning that they could enter the temple and light the candles of the Menorah.

During Chanukah, the candles on the Menorah are lit to remember that God, who has performed miracles in the past, can perform them now too.

Prisoners attempted to celebrate Chanukah in the camps, smuggling oil from where they were sent to work, making wicks from their clothes and trading food for matches. This meant they could make a candle and light it to remember Chanukah.

Chanukah is the festival of light – where day begins to overcome night.

In one camp on the first day of Chanukah, the prisoners lit candles in the huts. The German guards then declared that this was forbidden. On the second day of Chanukah there were no candles lit.

On the third day there was a blackout, so candles had to be lit. The prisoners believed this was a miracle.

Chanukah customs – eating dried food, playing dreidel and lighting candles were almost impossible, as most of the Jews' belongings had been taken from them and they were only given bread and soup to eat.

Why do Jews celebrate Purim?

Based on the story of Esther Mordechai (a Jew) who refused to bow down to one of the King's ministers – Haman, as Jews bow only to God. Haman convinces the king to kill all Jews in the kingdom. Esther, who was engaged to the king, exposed Haman as a liar and saved the Jews from extermination.

Purim is remembered as a day of redemption – the day the Jews were saved.

On Purim, the story of Esther is read. Purim gifts are given and a celebratory/festive meal is held.

Often children dress up on Purim. The festival is fun, with singing, dancing, stories and lots of noise.

Purim often draws attraction to Jewish Communities – sometimes leading them to be attacked.

Hitler was compared to Haman during the Holocaust. The story of Purim helped the Jews to remain hopeful of a future victory.

A reading from Esther is repeated at Purim: "Gather together and fight for your lives".

One Jewish teacher in 1943 added to this: "Pull yourselves together, please. Make an effort to keep going. The month and weeks until the downfall of Haman are few".

During the Holocaust it was impossible to celebrate Purim as the law commands, but even in the camps the Jews did what they could – writing the story on scraps of paper and giving gifts of slices of potato!

Why is Shabbat so important to the Jews?

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy”.
(Exodus 20)

Shabbat – the Sabbath day – is different to every other day. Commanded by God to keep it holy. A day of rest.

Shabbat begins at sunset on Friday evening and ends at sunset on Saturday.

Shabbat is a time to rest, worship and spend quality time with family and friends.

Shabbat has become a symbol of freedom – allowing people to be free from work.

The most important law of Shabbat is to light candles – to welcome Shabbat.

During the Holocaust, women stole oil and made candles with the oil, potatoes and cloth – so they could still welcome Shabbat.

Prisoners were made to work very hard in the camps during the Holocaust. They had to work on Shabbat too.