

## The Jewish Calendar

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Overview:**

This lesson will introduce students to the structure of the Jewish calendar and its origins in Babylonia. Students will explore the dating methods and the origins of the days, weeks, months, years, and festivals that are still observed today.

Following the Babylonian conquest in 586 BCE, the exiled people of Judea arrived in Babylonia and confronted a sophisticated and very different society. There they absorbed many aspects of the general culture (such as calendrical names and the local language and writing system), but maintained their own separate religion and traditions.

The lesson begins with a summary of the Babylonian Captivity, the context in which the development of the Jewish calendar took place. Students will then explore different aspects of the Jewish calendar, comparing it with the Gregorian calendar.

**Grade Level:** Middle School

**Subjects Covered:** Ancient Civilization, World History, World Religions, Lifecycles, Geography

#### **Goals:**

Students will use the calendar, which has provided structure for the daily life and religious practice of Jews for thousands of years, as a vehicle for learning more about Jewish life. Students will understand the development of the Jewish calendar as a product of adapting to exile after 586 BCE.

#### **Learning Objectives:**

Students will be able to:

1. locate Jerusalem and Babylon on an ancient map;
2. describe the origins of the Hebrew calendar;
3. define what constitutes a day, month, and year in the Hebrew calendar;
4. describe the origins of Jewish holidays;
5. connect this knowledge with their knowledge of Jewish holidays today.

**Suggested Time Frame:** Two 45-minute sessions

## LEARNING ACTIVITIES

*Before you begin:*

*Teachers should be sure to explore all bookmarked pages of the DVD-ROM used in this lesson.*

### **Introductory Activity: Introduction to the Jewish Calendar**

1. Ask students what they know about the Jewish calendar; write responses on chalkboard/easel:

- What are some important events in the Jewish calendar?
- Can you name some Jewish holidays?
- What is the next holiday we are going to celebrate?
- What is the current day/month/year according to the Jewish calendar?

2. Provide a working definition of the Gregorian calendar, the calendar most commonly used today. A good place to look is [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com), using the search term “Gregorian calendar.” Have students note that:

- The Gregorian calendar is a modification of the Julian calendar
- The Gregorian calendar is not perfect; leap years make up for the fact that a solar year is not exactly 365 days.

### **Learning Activity 1: A People in Exile**

In 586 BCE, Babylonia defeated Assyria and Egypt and conquered Judah, destroying the Temple in Jerusalem. The Judean leadership was forced to move more than 500 miles from Judah to Babylon.

1. Watch video segment [Babylon](#). Stop shortly after video advances to segment Judean Life in Babylon, “...it was here that Judaism was born.”

2. Ask the class:

- What does Psalm 137 imply about the Babylonian Captivity?
- What do you see happening in the video? What kind of sights and activities characterized ancient Babylonia? How might the Jews thrive in this environment?
- What modern country includes the area of ancient Babylon?

3. Click on map year [586 BCE](#).

Indicate the geographical locations of Jerusalem and Babylon, and the geographical extent of the Babylonian empire. Use the modern map view to point out where these locations are today.

4. Ask the class to consider the dislocation of the Israelites from Judea to Babylonia:

- What might it have been like to be forced to move to a completely different country and culture?

- In what ways might your life change if you had to move?
- What objects might you bring with you to remind you of home?
- What traditions/customs might you continue to observe?

## **Learning Activity 2: The Hebrew Calendar**

### **Introductory Activity**

The Israelites exiled in Babylonia brought their traditions with them. In their new environment, they absorbed some of their new neighbors' ways of life and adapted some of their traditions to their new home.

1. Watch the multimedia presentation [The Jewish Calendar: The Yearly Cycles of Life](#).
2. Ask the class:
  - Where does the modern Jewish calendar come from?
  - How does a calendar “lay out the structure by which people live”?

*After the multimedia presentation ends, an explorable graphic will appear on the screen. Click on each section (Weeks and Days, Months, Years, Festivals) in turn and ask the questions below. The section “Dates” appears as an optional activity. During the “Jewish Calendar” presentation, you can reach the explorable graphic screen at the end of the multimedia by hitting the space bar.*

### **Weeks and Days**

Although the basic structure of the Jewish calendar is based on the Babylonian system, the ancient Israelites' recognition of the Sabbath set their calendar apart.

1. Watch the explorable graphic segment [Weeks and Days](#).
2. Ask the class:
  - What are the biblical names for the days of the week? (Hint: look in Genesis 1:5-2:3)
  - What is the significance of the Jews naming only one day of the week, the Sabbath, with a special name?
  - How do the Hebrew names for days of the week reflect the tradition of the ancient Jewish calendar?

### **Months**

As with the Babylonian calendar, the monthly cycles of the Jewish calendar are dependent on the moon, and the names of the months are based upon the Babylonian model.

1. Watch the explorable graphic segment [Months](#).

2. Ask the class:

- How did the Babylonian exile change the months in the Jewish calendar?

### **Years**

The Jewish calendar is lunisolar—months are based on the phases of the moon and years are based on the rotation of the earth around the sun. Occasionally this necessitates the addition of a thirteenth month to the twelve-month Jewish calendar.

1. Watch the explorable graphic segment Years.

2. Ask the class:

- What would happen to the festival cycle if an extra month was not added?
- Think about when in the year the holidays occur and what they commemorate and/or celebrate.

### **Festivals**

Today's Jewish calendar contains some of the festivals celebrated in ancient times, but many changes and additions have been made over the past several thousand years. The 9<sup>th</sup> of Av (Tisha b' Av) is a holiday commemorating the destruction of the First Temple, which occurred in 586 BCE and prompted the exile in Bablyon.

1. Watch the explorable graphic segment Festivals . Stop after the narration "They may also have observed a day of fast on the ninth of Av."

2. Ask the class:

- How were the ancient Jewish holidays like the holidays the Jews observe today?
- How were they different?

### **Culminating Activity:**

1. Distribute the Calendar handout, showing the dates of major Jewish holidays relative to the Gregorian calendar in the Hebrew years 5766, 5767, and 5768. If you wish to extend the calendar by adding on years, look at a perpetual Jewish calendar such as the one provided at <http://www.hebc.com/hebc/>.

2. Using a standard wall or desk calendar, have the class plot the Jewish holidays occurring that year. Note that the Hebrew year will change in the fall, although the Gregorian year will not. Also note that some calendars may already have Jewish holidays written in, indicating either the evening the holiday beings, or the first full day of the holiday (e.g., for the year 5767, Yom Kippur may be in either the October 1 or 2 square of a Gregorian calendar).

3. Ask the class:

- What do you notice about the Gregorian dates of the Jewish holidays?
- Why do the Gregorian dates change? (Refer to the “Years” section)
- What happens to the Gregorian dates of the Jewish holidays between 5766 and 5767? What would happen if this pattern continued?
- In what way is 5768 different from the two years before? What does that do to the Gregorian dates of the Jewish holidays? What does that do to the calendar in general?

4. Look at the “Three Principle Calendars” table provided at [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) under the search term “calendar.” Students may wish to compare the Jewish and Islamic calendars. Note that the Islamic calendar does not provide for leap years; thus the Islamic months do not correspond to Gregorian months, therefore festivals may begin in different seasons each year.

### **Optional Activity 1: An Evolving Calendar**

The method by which the Jews keep track of years, dates, and major events has changed twice since biblical times.

1. Watch the explorable graphic segment [Dates](#).
2. Ask the class:
  - How did the ancient Israelites identify years? How did their dating system change?

### **Optional Activity 2: Codifying the Jewish Calendar**

The Jewish calendar and its holy days continued to develop and change over time. The following excerpt from the Mishnah lists the Jewish holy days recognized in the second century CE. Although the tractate primarily deals with the laws surrounding Rosh ha-Shanah, it should be noted that there are actually four New Years days set forth.

1. Read the verses from the Mishnah, tractate [Rosh ha-Shanah 1:1-9](#)
2. Ask the class:
  - On the Gregorian calendar, New Years day is celebrated on January 1<sup>st</sup>. The Hebrew calendar has four New Years days, as this tractate notes. Does the text give a reason for why there are four New Year days?
  - What does each New Years signify?
  - What are some other important days in your lives that might mark the beginning of a year, other than January 1st?

**Extension Activity:** For individual assessment, have students choose a holiday and write a short essay about it. Students should touch on when it occurs (time of day, date, time

of year), what its purpose is, and any historical background about the celebration they gleaned.

## **MATERIALS**

### Calendar Handout

Standard wall or desk calendar

## **STANDARDS**

### **Historical Understanding**

**Standard 1:** Understands and knows how to analyze chronological relationships and patterns.

Level IV, Benchmark 4: Understands alternative systems of recording time (e.g., Egyptian, Indian, Mayan, Muslim, Jewish), astronomical systems on which they are based (e.g., solar, lunar, semilunar), their fixed points for measuring time, and their strengths and weaknesses

### **World History**

**Standard 7:** Understands technological and cultural innovation from 1000 to 600 BCE.

Level III, Benchmark 4: Understands social development and religious beliefs of Jewish civilization (e.g., the course of development of the Jewish kingdoms and the Jews' maintenance of religious and cultural traditions despite destruction of these kingdoms, the significance of the Torah in Judaism)

Level IV, Benchmark 2: Understands events that led to the spread of Judaism (e.g., the significance of the Babylonian captivity for the subsequent history and survival of Judaism, the significance of the Jewish diaspora for the transmission of Judaism in the Mediterranean region and Southwest Asia)

## DVD-ROM BOOKMARKS

**Babylon** (Video > The Power of the Word > Babylon > Psalm 137 > Play)

**586 BCE** (Atlas > 3100 BCE-586 BCE. Zoom in twice for the most comprehensive view of the Babylonian Empire.)

**The Jewish Calendar: The Yearly Cycles of Life** (Video > The Power of the Word > Babylon > Judean Life in Babylon > Explore Topic > The Jewish Calendar: The Yearly Cycles of Life)

**Weeks and Days** (Video > The Power of the Word > Babylon > Judean Life in Babylon > Explore Topic > The Jewish Calendar: The Yearly Cycles of Life > Weeks and Days)

**Months** (Video > The Power of the Word > Babylon > Judean Life in Babylon > Explore Topic > The Jewish Calendar: The Yearly Cycles of Life > Months)

**Years** (Video > The Power of the Word > Babylon > Judean Life in Babylon > Explore Topic > The Jewish Calendar: The Yearly Cycles of Life > Years)

**Festivals** (Video > The Power of the Word > Babylon > Judean Life in Babylon > Explore Topic > The Jewish Calendar: The Yearly Cycles of Life > Festivals)

**Dates** (Video > The Power of the Word > Babylon > Judean Life in Babylon > Explore Topic > The Jewish Calendar: The Yearly Cycles of Life > Dates)

**Mishnah Tractate Rosh ha-Shanah 1:1-9** (Timeline > The Shaping of Traditions > 200 CE > Palestine: Mishnah > Codifying the Jewish Calendar. Be sure to click on the hypertexts in the body of the document for a more detailed explanation of the term and how it relates to the holy day.)

**Handout #1: Chart of Secular Dates for Jewish Holidays, 5766-5768**

<b>Holiday/ Hebrew Date</b>	<b>5766</b>	<b>5767</b>	<b>5768 (“Leap” year—2 Adars)</b>
<b>Rosh Hashanah Tishrei 1-2</b>	October 4-5, 2005	September 23-24, 2006	September 13-14, 2007
<b>Yom Kippur Tishrei 10</b>	October 10	October 2	September 22
<b>Sukkot Tishrei 15-21</b>	October 18-24	October 7-13	September 27- October 3
<b>Shimini Atzeret Tishrei 22</b>	October 25	October 14	October 4
<b>Simchat Torah Tishrei 23</b>	October 26	October 15	October 5
<b>Chanukah Kislev 25-Tevet 2</b>	December 26- January 2, 2006	December 16-23	December 5-12
<b>Purim Adar 14</b>	March 14	March 4, 2007	March 21, 2007
<b>Passover Nissan 15-22</b>	April 13-20	April 3-10	April 20-27
<b>Shavuot Sivan 6-7</b>	June 2-3	May 23-24	June 9-10
<b>Tisha B’Av Av 9</b>	August 3	July 24	August 10

(Holidays begin on the sundown before the given Gregorian date)