

*Celebrating 125 Years*

# NORTHAMPTON HEBREW CONGREGATION

## An Education Pack



**Our synagogue, community  
and Jewish Festivals**

**For pupils at Key Stages 2 & 3**

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# INTRODUCTION

This education pack is intended for pupils at Key Stages 2 and 3, though it could also be used with older learners. Teachers can adapt and use the materials as they see fit, across all the key stages. Our intention is to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Northampton Hebrew Congregation by describing briefly the history of our community, and the ways we celebrate our festivals. We want to give you a view of Judaism, as practised in Northampton, 'from the inside'. This pack is thus a guide, not only to our synagogue, but also to our values and way of life. Enjoy!

**Michael Necus      Marcus Roberts      Daniel Tabor**

## FOREWORD

From the earliest times, Judaism has stressed the importance of education and learning. One of the basic duties of Jewish parents is to provide for the instruction of their children as set out in the first paragraph of the Shema Yisrael ('Hear, O Israel') prayer which Jews say every morning and evening and contains some of the most important principles of Judaism:

**“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these words with which I command you this day. You shall teach them to your children.”**

*(Deuteronomy 6:5-7)*

It is often said that ignorance can lead to fear, prejudice and hatred. Living as we do in a multi-cultural society, it is important that we learn as much as we can about each other's faiths and beliefs and that we treat them with mutual respect.

I am delighted to introduce this education pack which is being published to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the formation of the Northampton Hebrew Congregation. It contains a vast amount of information about Judaism in general, the Jewish way of life and about the Northampton Jewish Community and it will be useful both for teachers and children.

For those of you who are visiting our synagogue for the first time, welcome. For those who have been before, welcome back! I hope that you find your visit interesting and enlightening.

**John Josephs**

**President**

**Northampton Hebrew Congregation**

October 2013

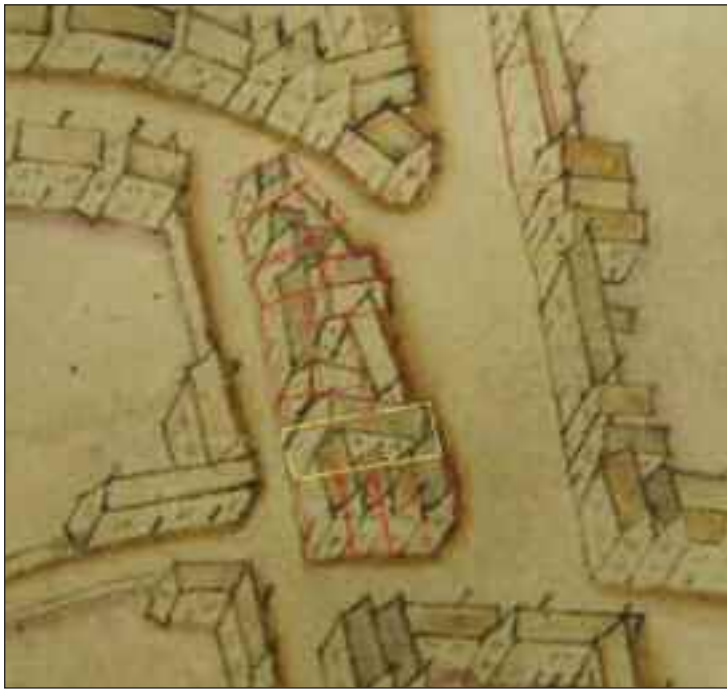
## THE HISTORY OF THE NORTHAMPTON JEWISH COMMUNITY

The Jewish community in Northampton dates from the 12th century. It was an important Jewish community, centred on Sheep Street, near the main town markets. The community had a synagogue, and a cemetery was outside the ancient town walls, off the Barrack Road (Temple Bar). The Jewish community had a number of important scholars and rabbis and a house of Jewish study. (A rabbi is a teacher of Judaism, able to give decisions about Jewish law, and he is usually the leader of the community as well.)



*A fragment of a medieval Jewish tombstone, in the Northampton Central Museum, to a Northampton Jewish scholar and rabbi. It is the only surviving medieval Jewish tombstone in Britain.*

All the Jews were expelled from Northampton and England in 1290, by Edward I, who took all of the Jewish houses. In 1992, the skeletons of three Jews from eight hundred years ago, were discovered at Temple Bar, and later reburied in the present-day Jewish Cemetery in Northampton.



*Rare Map (1620) showing the original Northampton Medieval Synagogue in Sheep Street (outlined in yellow)*

*Tombstone for three 12th century Northampton Jews, reburied in the modern Jewish cemetery in 2010.*



A few individual Jews returned to Northampton in the 18th century, but the first permanent resident families only came in the 1840s. The congregation was founded 125 years ago and the synagogue was purchased in 1888.



*A pair of 'Oxford' shoes produced by G.L. Michel (a Jewish shoe manufacturer and leather merchant) in the 1890s*

A Northampton Jew set up one of the first two modern boot and shoe factories in the town in 1857, introducing new technologies and methods of organising production - the start of the modern industrialised foot-wear industry in Northampton. Many Jewish residents were market traders in textiles, or had tailoring businesses. A well-known tailor's shop was 'Doffman's', on the corner of Abington Street and the Market Square, and between the wars it became known as 'Doffman's Corner'.



*Doffman's Corner in the early 20th century*

The Jewish community remained very small – just 17 members in 1909, increasing to 70 members in 1938. Just before, and during the Second World War, many Jews came to Northampton. These were evacuees from London and Jewish refugees fleeing from Hitler’s Europe. During the war the Jewish population of Northampton was over a thousand, though after the war many evacuees went back to London, but enough stayed to make the community much larger than before the War.

The first synagogue on our site in Overstone Road was a converted ‘iron-church’ building, which was replaced with a purpose-built synagogue in the 1960s. The Jewish population of Northampton today is around one hundred, and consists mainly of older people, because their children have grown up and gone to live in places such as London, Leeds or Manchester. These cities are where most Jews in England now live.



*The ‘New Jerusalem’ Church, converted to a synagogue in 1888. It became the first synagogue in Northampton since the medieval period.*

## VISITING OUR SYNAGOGUE

The synagogue is a special place for Jewish people in Northampton and we hope that you enjoy coming to visit us!

The following activities can be used to help you learn more about our building and community and why we think they are special.



*Welcome to our synagogue!*  
(© M. Roberts)

(Note to teachers: The object of this education pack is to provide a resource that can be used for planning an RE visit to our synagogue and can be used in lessons, before, during, and after your visit to our synagogue and provide a general Judaism resource. The pack will help familiarise visitors with the building, furniture and religious artefacts, in a typical traditional synagogue and how the building is used as the focus of community life and its links with the annual cycle of Jewish festivals.)

The Northampton Jewish Congregation is an independent, orthodox synagogue, and our services are run on traditional lines. Most of the prayers are in Hebrew, and men and women sit separately. Some other Jewish communities may be affiliated to the Reform or Liberal Jewish Movements, which means that, for example, men and women might be seated together, and more of the service will be in English.

Activities 1 – 3 can form the basis of your visit to Northampton synagogue, supplemented by other activities and questions to suit your needs.



## ACTIVITIES

### **Activity 1**

When you first arrive, find a quiet place to sit down for 5 minutes on your own, without talking to anyone around you, or attracting their attention. As you sit quietly, pay attention to this special place that you are in, and as you sit:

- ▶ Close your eyes – what do you hear? Do you hear any sounds, what are they, are they quiet or loud?
- ▶ How does the building make you feel? Do you feel calm or peaceful, or something else?
- ▶ What do you smell?
- ▶ Open your eyes; what do you see? Are there colours and decoration and special objects?

Spend 5 minutes writing down your experiences which can also be discussed with the group.

### **Activity 2**

With a large sheet of paper and a pen or a pencil, spend 10 minutes making a sketch plan or map of the synagogue and the building and label all of the things that you can recognise. (You will be able to fill in the parts you don't recognise later and you can complete a neat version when you are back at school.)

### **Activity 3**

Find one object in the synagogue that you are interested in and draw it and label it and describe it in your own words. Why did you choose this object to draw and what made it interesting? Try to find out more about it during and after your visit.

## THE SYNAGOGUE

The word 'synagogue' comes from a Greek word which means a meeting-place or house of assembly, though a synagogue is as much about the people as the building. In many places where Jews live, you will often find a synagogue.

The first synagogues started 2,500 years ago, when Jews who were forced to live in Babylon, and could no longer worship at the central Temple in Jerusalem, where most worship and sacrifices took place. The synagogues that they set-up were regarded as 'mini-temples' and synagogues have often been described as 'the Temple in miniature'. Synagogues were common across Israel by the time of Jesus, and after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, in 70 C.E., all Jewish worship took place in synagogues. The daily prayer services and the reading of the Torah were used to replace the services and sacrifices in the Temple that could no longer be carried out. Traditional synagogues are still influenced by the design of ancient synagogues in Israel, as are some Christian buildings.

The synagogue is where the Jewish community can pray, and meet and feel safe, and the synagogue is often used as a community centre. Here in Northampton, we use our synagogue for these purposes, too.



*A model of the original Temple in Jerusalem*

### **Activity 4**

Think about and write down all of the places that are special to you – what makes them special and are they special to other people as well?

### **What can you see in our synagogue?**

The synagogue is full of interesting furniture, objects and decoration which are important in worship and remind Jewish people of their history.

### **Activity 5**

As you look around the synagogue, what do you think are the most important things in the building (without asking your teacher, or guide in the synagogue)? Why do you think this? (Clue: think of size and position.)

## **THE ARK (ARON HA-KODESH)**

At the far (east) end of the synagogue is a special cupboard with a curtain in front of it. This is the Holy Ark (in Hebrew, the Aron Ha-Kodesh). It contains the Scrolls of the Torah (or 'teaching'), the sacred scriptures that were given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Christians know these as the first Five Books of the Bible, and the most famous part is the Ten Commandments, which are engraved on a wooden shield above the Ark. The Aron is based on the Ark, which was the golden box that was used to carry the two stones of the Ten Commandments in the Bible.



*The Ark containing the scrolls of the Torah at the synagogue in Northampton.*

### **Activity 6**

Why do you think the Ark is always facing East? (Clue: what famous building in Israel was east of here?)

### **Activity 7**

How many of the Ten Commandments do you know? They were dictated to Moses over 3000 years ago, but do you think they still apply to us today?

Scrolls of the Torah in the Northampton synagogue, with special covers, breast plates and other ornaments. These ornaments are known as Rimonim in Hebrew.  
(© M. Roberts)



A 19th century board with the Ten Commandments from the Oxford Synagogue. The hands show the blessing made by the descendants of the Cohanim (the original priests of the Temple). DNA tests have shown that people with the name Cohen are possibly descendants of the families who ran the Temple 2,000 years ago. The position of the fingers is the same as the Vulcan greeting in Star Trek, as Leonard Nimoy (Mr. Spock) copied it from his memories of the blessings in his own synagogue as a child.  
(© M. Roberts)

## **Activity 8**

You will notice that the scrolls of the Torah are elaborately dressed and decorated. Why do you think this is? What does it tell us about how Jewish people feel about the Torah?

### **ETERNAL LAMP (NER TAMID)**

The lamp over the centre of the Ark has a light that is supposed to burn all or most of the time. The lamp is a symbol of God's light and protection and the light of the Torah.



*The Ner Tamid (Eternal Light) in the synagogue in Northampton.  
(© M. Roberts)*

## **Activity 9**

Why do you think that a candle or a lamp is often used to represent God?

## THE BIMAH

In the centre of the synagogue is a raised platform with a reading desk, called a Bimah in Hebrew. This is where the Torah scrolls are unrolled and read during the weekly synagogue service, which is held on a Saturday morning, or on special festival days. One person chants a portion from the Torah, and there is usually another reading from one of the Prophets, such as Isaiah, who lived over 2,600 years ago. The Jewish scriptures are written in Hebrew, the language of the ancient Israelites, and it is the basis of the language spoken today in Israel (but with some new words that are not in the Torah, such as words for 'football' and 'ice-cream'). In a traditional synagogue like ours, the men and women sit separately during the services.

*The Northampton synagogue before a service, with the reading desk or platform in the middle, which shows that the Torah is at the centre of what we do.*



*Women sit separately from the men, in the section nearest the camera.*

In the case of Northampton, women sit behind a small barrier or screen, or in some other synagogues, upstairs in a gallery. In the Northampton synagogue, we also have a large curtain that can be drawn across the east end of the synagogue, and this lets us use the main part of the hall for communal activities, such as dinners, quizzes and meetings.

### **Activity 10**

Why do you think it is important that the synagogue is used for communal activities, and not only for religious services?

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TORAH

Religious Jewish people believe that the Torah was given many thousands of years ago by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Many Jews still believe that it guides us to God and helps us to live good lives. They believe in one God, and that to serve Him there are three requirements: to follow the teaching of the Torah, to worship God, and to practise deeds of loving-kindness to all God's creatures. Charity is one of the most important Jewish ideas. Reading or chanting an extract from the Torah is therefore the central part of the synagogue service.

The Torah has been so carefully copied over two thousand years by rabbis and scribes that no mistakes have got into the text, a remarkable achievement. Every hand-written Torah scroll has to be perfect with no spelling mistakes. If a mistake is discovered the community has to stop using it until it is fixed, but if the name of God is not spelt correctly the whole Torah scroll would traditionally be buried in a grave as it cannot be thrown away! Torah scrolls cost about £20,000 to make.



*Reading from the Torah in the Northampton synagogue (© M Roberts*

*An extract from a Torah scroll, written in Hebrew. The person chanting from the scroll uses a special pointer, called in Hebrew the Yad ('hand'). You can see from the photo that it is in the shape of a hand, and it helps the reader keep his place as he reads the weekly portion.*

*(© M Roberts)*



## **BAR-MITZVAH**

When a boy reaches 13 years old he has a bar-mitzvah (literally, 'son of the commandment'). He has to read a portion from the Torah scroll to the whole community on the Sabbath of his thirteenth birthday, instead of the rabbi. There are no vowels in the Torah Scroll, unlike the prayer book, so the bar-mitzvah boy may spend up to a year learning his portion for that day. It is a real challenge, and it marks his transition from being a child to becoming an adult member of the community, though afterwards he is rewarded with presents and a party.

Girls can have a bat-mitzvah (literally, 'daughter of the commandment') at 12 years old, which usually involves giving a talk about the portion read from the Torah, or reading a Hebrew poem, or some other project that demonstrates their commitment to Judaism.

### **Activity 11**

At what age do you think that a boy or girl should be considered grown-up? Can you think of reasons why the Jewish coming-of-age is quite young by modern standards?





*A father helping his son prepare for his bar-mitzvah.*

## What else can you see in the synagogue?

### THE MENORAH

This is a seven-branched candlestick that symbolises the seven days of creation, as described in the first book of the Bible. God took six days to make the world and then on the seventh day he rested – the Sabbath. Religious Jews believe that they should rest from all work on the Jewish Sabbath (Friday evening to Saturday evening) because God says so in the Torah. The cover hanging in front of the Ark in the Northampton synagogue

has an embroidered image of the Menorah on it.

A special type of candlestick is used to celebrate the Festival of Chanukah; it has eight branches and is known as a chanukiah.

### Activity 12

The word 'holiday' comes from the word 'holy-day' because people used to only have time off for religious festivals; the original 'holiday'. Do you think it is important for people to have time off? What sorts of things do people like to do on their time off? How does this help us understand the ideas of the Jewish Sabbath? (Clue: people often talk about holidays as 'quality time'; how might the Sabbath be 'quality time' for religious Jews?)

### KIPPAH (OR SKULL CAP)

Jewish men have had a custom of covering their head for many centuries. Today Orthodox Jewish males, from the age of thirteen, wear a kippah, when praying in synagogue, or in the home. Covering the head during prayer shows respect in the presence of God and can show other people that you are Jewish. Married Jewish women, will usually wear a hat, or head covering such as a shawl, or snood (a special hair-net), in synagogue, in order to cover their hair.

### Activity 13

Why do you think that religious people from different religions often wear head covering or hats? Why might they be upset if people tell them they should not wear them?

## PRAYER BOOK (HEBREW: SIDDUR)

The Jewish prayer book is written in Hebrew with an English translation, and some of the prayers are very ancient. The majority of the religious service in the synagogue is in the Hebrew language, though the prayer for the Royal Family is always given in English, as English Jews want everyone to know that they are patriotic.

*The prayer for the Royal Family, in the Northampton synagogue.*



### **Activity 14**

Can you think of other languages used by other religions, in their prayers and scriptures? Why do you think that Jews would like to pray using a language that is at least 3,000 years old? What are the problems of praying using an ancient language?

### **Activity 15**

Do you notice anything unusual about where the prayer book starts, compared to an ordinary book in English? Is there a correct direction for reading a language?

## THE TALLIT (PRAYER SHAWL)

This is a white cloak with blue or black stripes, and fringes at the corners, which Jewish men wear when they pray during morning services (women in the Reform and Liberal synagogue may also wear them, too). The fringes have complicated knots which represent the 613 commandments of the Torah, and Jewish men are supposed to wear fringes to remind them of the laws at all times.

### **Activity 16**

Some Jews like to completely cover their head with the tallit while praying. Why do you think they like to do this?

## TEFILLIN

Before Orthodox Jewish men start to pray in the morning, they put on little leather boxes - tefillin (phylacteries) held on to their left arm and on their forehead by leather straps. Each box contains a piece of parchment, written with words from the Torah, reminding Jews to think of God at all times and to remember how He has delivered the Jewish people – and not only when they pray. In ages past the tefillin were very small and Jewish men would wear the tefillin all day, not just at prayer.



*A pair of tefillin with their leather straps ready to put on.  
Note the Hebrew letter 'Shin' on the right-hand tefillin box,  
symbolising one of the names of God. The tefillin are made of leather.  
(© M. Roberts)*

### **Activity 17**

When the tefillin are worn, they are put on, so that the arm tefillin is held against the heart and the other is placed on the head. Why do you think they are worn this way – is there a special meaning? (Clue: think how both the heart and the head might both be needed to follow God.)

*Praying with kippah, tallit and tefillin in the Northampton synagogue. (© M. Roberts)*



## **SHOFAR**

Another object you will find in a synagogue, is the ram's horn, or shofar. Jews blow the shofar at the service for the Jewish New Year, in September or October, to make people aware of how important it is as a new beginning. It is a real skill to blow the shofar – can you get a note out of it? The Jewish tradition says that it was the blowing of the shofar by Joshua that caused the walls of Jericho to fall down, so be careful when you blow it!



*A large English shofar used in an English synagogue  
in the 19th century (© M. Roberts)*



*Blowing the shofar in the Northampton synagogue  
(© M. Roberts)*

## MEZUZAH

If you look at the door lintels of Jewish homes, you will find a small box on the right-hand lintel called a mezuzah (Hebrew: 'door-post') which contains a small hand-written scroll. The scroll is a piece of parchment with two short hand-written extracts from the Torah (from the Book of Deuteronomy). The scroll is usually contained inside the mezuzah case to keep it dry and safe. The mezuzah is a sign that those who reside in the house are Jewish and in places where Jews were persecuted the mezuzah would sometimes be hidden inside the door-frame.



*A mezuzah on a Northamptonshire Jewish home. (© M. Roberts)*

## JEWISH FESTIVALS

We come to the synagogue regularly to pray, to celebrate the major Jewish festivals, and to be together as a community, but Judaism is really a religion of the home. Jewish women take considerable responsibility for the Jewish life of the home, even though it is the men who perform many of the rituals in the traditional synagogue. The Festivals are celebrated in the home, too. All Jewish festivals, including the Sabbath, start at sunset, as Jewish days start in the evening. This is because the Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar (based on the monthly cycles of the Moon). Here are some of the most important ones:

### SHABBAT (THE SABBATH)

The Sabbath is actually a small weekly festival. After attending a short service on Friday night, Jews go home to celebrate Shabbat (the Sabbath), the day of rest which starts at night-fall. Two candles are lit, the children are blessed by their parents, and a special blessing is said over two loaves of braided bread (challah) and wine. Then the family honours the Sabbath by eating a good meal together and on Saturday they may go to synagogue and eat other meals together. The Sabbath ends with a short ritual at night-fall on Saturday night, called **Havdalah**. The Sabbath is supposed to be peaceful and a day when one concentrates on God, family and community without distractions.



*Making the blessing over the candles (© JTrails)*

*The start of the Friday evening meal. The candles have been lit, and a blessing said over wine and bread. The family members are eating a piece of braided bread (challah).*



### **Activity 18**

How can we tell when the Sabbath or a Festival starts?

### **Activity 19**

Why do you think there are two candles and two loaves of bread?

When the Sabbath comes to a close we mark the division between the sacred day and start of the new week with **Havdalah** (literally: 'division'). Blessings are made over wine, sweet-smelling spices and a candle. The candle is then extinguished in some of the wine, and we wish each other a good week. The sweet-smelling spices are said to refresh the soul, which is sad at the departure of the Sabbath.





*Celebrating Havdalah in Northampton. The plaited candle is being extinguished in some wine, to mark the end of the Sabbath. The silver spice-box is at the back, in the left-hand side of the picture.*

*(© M. Roberts)*

## **THE JEWISH NEW YEAR (ROSH HA-SHANAH)**

Most people think the New Year occurs in January, in the darkest, coldest part of the year, but different religions and cultures celebrate their New Years at other times.

The Jewish New Year occurs in September (and Rosh Ha-Shanah, literally means ‘the Head of the Year’), and may have originated as a harvest festival. Now we use the month of Tishri in the Hebrew calendar, and particularly the period of ten days between these two festivals in Tishri, to think about the new year ahead. We start to say sorry to God or other people for things we have done wrong, and promise that we will put things right in the year ahead.

In the Jewish tradition, a person’s fate for the coming year was decided on Rosh Ha-Shanah. The central feature of the Rosh Ha-Shanah service is the blowing of the shofar, the ram’s horn, and the loud blowing of the shofar was explained by the famous Jewish sage Maimonides, as a spiritual wake-up call, to reconnect us to the real purpose of life and to God.

In October 2013, it will be the Jewish Year 5774, which was calculated by adding up chronologically the ages of the people whose stories are told in the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is customary to dip a piece of apple in honey, and to eat other sweet things while praying for a ‘sweet and good year’.

*Dipping a piece of apple in honey to symbolise a sweet start to the New Year.*  
(© M. Roberts)



## **Activity 20**

What do you know about the ways the New Year is celebrated in other religions or cultures? In what ways are they similar to the Jewish New Year?

## **YOM KIPPUR (DAY OF ATONEMENT)**

Yom Kippur occurs ten days after the New Year and is the most solemn of the Jewish Festivals. It involves a fast from both food and water for 25 hours. We pray as a community and for each other that our sins during the previous year will be forgiven, and that God will write our names and 'seal us in the Book of Life', for the coming year.

Jews understand 'sin' as moving away from God, through our choices and actions. Yom Kippur is our opportunity to 'return' to be with God again, who always wants us to return to him and Jews believe that this connection to God is never really broken. The 'atonement' in the 'Day of Atonement', is literally about getting 'at-one-ment' with God again, so while Yom Kippur is a very solemn festival it is not just about doom and gloom. There is joy in returning to God, though the hunger and the thirst by fasting remind us that we need to be serious about repentance and forgiveness!

## **Activity 21**

In what ways are the Christian month of Lent and the Muslim celebration of Ramadan, similar, or dissimilar, to the Jewish month of Elul?

## SUKKOT (TABERNACLES)

This is a harvest Festival of Thanksgiving, that occurs in the autumn, after Yom Kippur, and lasts a week. Jews construct a simple booth or hut, called a sukkah, which is often beautifully decorated with seasonal fruits that are hung from the roof covering. The roof covering is made of things that have grown in the soil, such as branches, or straw. The covering can be quite thick, yet it must also have gaps in it so that you can see the stars in the night sky, and so it will let the rain in. It is customary to eat all your meals in the sukkah – weather permitting! In medieval England, we know that the Jews of Oxford used to celebrate the festival on the roof-tops! According to tradition, building and using the sukkah reminds us of the temporary shelters that the Children of Israel lived in during their journey through the desert.



*A rather grand sukkah before a meal (left), and a picture of a more modest sukkah (right). Fruits are hung from the roof as decoration.*



### **Activity 22**

The sukkah is a temporary and often leaky and cold shelter. Jews believe this gives us an important message about life and what is important – what might this be? (Clue: this is a discussion about what is permanent and impermanent.)

## SIMCHAT TORAH (REJOICING OF THE LAW)

On the last day of Tabernacles we celebrate the 'Rejoicing of the Law'. This marks the completion of reading the whole Torah, the Five Books of Moses, which takes a year. It is celebrated because it marks the point in time when the reading of the Torah can start all over again! There is a procession in the synagogue, the children in the synagogue are blessed and given apples and sweets, and the adults dance holding the scrolls of the Law, singing religious songs, to show their joy.

### **Activity 23**

Do you have a favourite book, that you enjoy so much that when you have finished it, you want to start reading it all over again?

## CHANUKAH (FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS)

This is an eight-day festival in December, and it commemorates the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem 2,200 years ago. The Israelites had been ruled by the Greeks, and the Temple had been defiled and used for pagan practices. A family called the Maccabees led the Jews in revolt, drove out the Greeks, and relit the sacred lamp in the Temple that signified God's presence. They only had enough oil for one day, but by a miracle the lamp burned for eight days, until new oil could be produced.

So we light candles for eight days, using a candlestick called a Chanukiah which has eight branches. It also has one extra branch known as a 'shammos' or worker which is lit first and then used to light the other lights. We also play a game with nuts and a spinning top called a dreidel. Jewish children are often given chocolate coins and presents on the eight days of Chanukah and foods cooked in oil, such as doughnuts, are eaten to remind us of the miracle of the oil. The festival is often around the same time as the Christian festival of Christmas, but is not to be confused with it.

*Lighting the  
Chanukah candles.*





*Celebrating a family Chanukah in Northamptonshire  
with four Chanukah candelabra, one for each family member (© M. Roberts)*

## **Activity 24**

Several religions have festivals in the darkest time of the year, which are celebrated by using bright lights, such as Chanukah, Divali, and Christmas. What do you think the reason for this is?

## **PURIM**

This is a minor festival that occurs around March, and it celebrates the deliverance of the Jews of Persia. One of the King of Persia's advisors, Haman, hated the Jews and wanted to destroy them, but Queen Esther, who was Jewish and married to the King, was able to confound his plot and save the Jews. The central feature of Purim is the reading of the 'Megillah' (lit. scroll), as the Scroll of Esther is called. Children hiss and boo when Haman's name is mentioned, and they are encouraged to dress up.

It is traditional to eat a tasty pastry called *hamantaschen* ('Haman's ears') stuffed with poppy seed, prunes or some other sweet filling. The children in a community also often put on a show about the Purim story called a Purim Spiel (Purim Play) and it is customary to send gifts of fruit and food to friends or those in need. Purim is generally a lot of fun, enjoyed by children and adults alike.

*Home-made hamantaschen – delicious!*



*A traditional Purim play (© M. Roberts)*

## **PESACH (PASSOVER)**

This commemorates the escape of the ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, and it occurs at Easter-time. The Israelites had to leave in such a hurry, that they did not have time to put yeast in their bread dough, so the bread did not rise when it was baked. As a result we eat matzah (unleavened bread), which is like a cracker or wafer, instead of bread, for the eight days of Passover.

We celebrate the first night of Passover with a service round the table at home, called the Seder (literally: 'order'), when we tell the story of the escape from Egypt, and eat symbolic or special foods that remind us of our deliverance. People who are not Jewish are often invited to join it at the Seder table, as the festival also looks forward to the day when the Messiah will come and bring peace to the whole world.



*Celebrating the Exodus from Egypt at a communal Seder.*

### **Activity 25**

The festival of Pesach celebrates the escape of the Jewish people from slavery into freedom. Why is it important for all of us to have freedom? Is there a difference between freedom from something and freedom to do something?

### **SHAVUOT (FESTIVAL OF WEEKS)**

Shavuot or the Festival of Weeks is known to Christians as Pentecost. It occurs seven weeks after Passover, and commemorates the arrival of the Children of Israel at Mount Sinai, where they were to receive the Ten Commandments. It is known in our prayer book as 'The Season of the giving of our Torah', and in many communities it is customary to decorate the synagogue with plants and flower in celebration. It is also customary to eat dairy foods during Shavuot to represent the sweetness and nourishment given by the Torah.



*Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Ten Commandments.*

### **Activity 26**

Who is the man in the picture and where has he been?

## JEWS AND FOOD

You will have noticed that food is mentioned a lot in this study pack! Different foods play an important part in the celebration of different Jewish festivals. Jews also have strict rules about what they can and cannot eat. Like Muslims, they do not eat pork; and blood must be removed from meat. Meat and milk products are not mixed – they have to be eaten separately. Animals have to be slaughtered in a humane way by a specially trained person. The word kosher (from the Hebrew kasher, meaning correct or right) refers to the laws about the correct preparation of food, and religious Jews will not eat food that is not kosher.

‘Keeping kosher’ is about using an everyday activity to help us to be closer to God. Kosher foods and the ways of preparing kosher foods are generally healthy and in the past helped avoid serious illnesses, for example from eating pork, which in the past could easily cause food poisoning, or pass on fatal parasites. However, keeping kosher is about respect for food and to help us remember that God provides our food. Kosher food is also symbolic, as we do not (for example) eat meat from animals that live by cruelty, but from vegetarian animals, nor do we eat meat from scavengers. Vegetarianism has also been a strong tradition in Judaism, though complete vegetarianism has never been recommended. Kosher food has some similarities with Halal food, though a major difference between the two traditions is that Jews will drink alcohol, while it is forbidden in Islam.

### Activity 27

Do you know about rules in other religions to do with food? Are there foods in your community that you only eat on special occasions or festivals? Why do they have these rules?



*Jerusalem, a city holy  
to three faiths.  
Above: the Dome of the Rock.*

## ISRAEL

Israel is the national home of the Jewish people and it was founded in 1948, though there has been a Jewish presence in the region since biblical times. Its capital is Jerusalem, a city holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims. Many Jews in Britain, including Northampton, have relatives living in Israel, and feel a special link with the country.





*Jews praying by the surviving wall of the Temple; the rest of it was destroyed 2000 years ago by the Romans.*

*The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.*



*A map showing Israel and its neighbours*

## APPENDIX 1: HOW TO PLAY DREYDL

A favourite past-time of children and adults alike on the Festival of Chanukah is playing with a *dreydl* (in English – a top). The *dreydl* has four letters from the Hebrew alphabet, imprinted on each of its sides. The letters are *nun*, *gimmel*, *hay* and *shin*, which stands for *Nais Gadol Hayah Shahm* - a great miracle happened there.

*Can you remember what the miracle of Chanukah was?*

The game is played by distributing either nuts or sweets to all those taking part. Everyone places one or two nuts in the middle or in a small pot, and someone spins the *dreydl*. If the *dreydl* stops showing the letter *nun*, he neither wins nor loses (i.e. nothing). If *gimmel*, he wins the entire pot. If *hay*, he gets half the pot. If *shin*, he must put one in the pot.

The game then continues with the next person taking his turn, and so on around the circle until someone has won everything. It is of course nice to distribute plenty of consolation prizes so that everyone can go home a winner! There are many legends about how this game originated, but the main thing is that it is fun, and you end up with something to eat – unless you are very unlucky!



*A pair of dreidls  
(© M. Roberts)*

*Letters on a dreidl: from  
the right – N, G, H, Sh.*

ש ה ג נ

## GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

<b>Term</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Ark or Aron Ha-Kodesh	The special cupboard with a curtain in front of it, at the east end of the synagogue, which contains the Scrolls of the Torah.
Bar-mitzvah	Literally, 'son of the commandment'. At the age of thirteen, a Jewish boy reads a portion from the Torah during the Saturday morning service. This marks his transition to becoming an adult member of the community.
Bat-mitzvah	Literally, 'daughter of the commandment'. Girls can have a bat-mitzvah at 12 years old, which usually involves giving a talk about the portion read from the Torah.
Bimah	Hebrew. The bimah is the reading desk in the middle of the synagogue, where the Torah scrolls are unrolled, and the portion for the week is read. The synagogue service is conducted from the bimah.
Challah	Braided bread, often decorated with sesame or poppy seeds, eaten on the Sabbath.
Chanukah	The Festival of Lights. This is an eight-day festival in December, and it commemorates the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem 2,200 years ago.
Dreydl	A top. A favourite past-time of children and adults alike on the Festival of Chanukah is playing a game with a dreydl for nuts or sweets. See Appendix 1 for instructions about playing dreydl.
Eternal Light	Hebrew: ner tamid. This is the lamp, which hangs in front of the Ark, and symbolises God's eternal presence.
Havdalah	The end of the Sabbath is marked by simple ceremony in the home at nightfall, called Havdalah (from the Hebrew, literally 'division', to distinguish or to make a division, between the Sabbath and the rest of the week).

Hebrew	Historically, it is the language of the Jewish people. The Jewish scriptures (referred to by Christians as The Old Testament) are written in Hebrew, which is read from right to left.
Kippah	Skullcap. It is worn by orthodox Jewish males from the age of thirteen when praying, as a sign of respect towards God. In Reform or Progressive communities, it can be worn by women as well.
Kosher	The word kosher (from the Hebrew kasher, meaning correct or right) refers to the laws about the correct preparation of food, and religious Jews will not eat food that is not kosher.
Matzah	Unleavened bread. The Israelites had to leave Egypt in such a hurry, that they did not have time to put yeast in their bread dough, so the bread did not rise when it was baked. As a result we eat matzah for the eight days of Pesach (Passover).
Megillah	Hebrew: 'scroll'. The Book of Esther, which recounts the story of Purim, and which is read in synagogue.
Menorah	The seven-branched candlestick that stood in the Temple in Jerusalem. The seven branches symbolise the seven days of creation. The menorah, as a symbol of spiritual light, is the most ancient and most powerful of Jewish symbols.
Mezuzah	Hebrew: 'door-post'. This is a small box attached to the right-hand lintel of a door in a Jewish home, which contains a small hand-written scroll with two short hand-written extracts from the Torah (from the Book of Deuteronomy).
Pesach (Passover)	This eight-day festival commemorates the escape of the ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, and it occurs at Easter-time.

Purim	This is a minor festival that occurs around March, and it celebrates the deliverance of the Jews of Persia.
Rabbi	A rabbi is a teacher of Judaism, able to give decisions about Jewish law, and he is usually the leader of the community as well.
Rimonim	Literally, 'pomegranates' (in Hebrew); the word describes the different ornaments, often made of silver, used to decorate the scrolls of the Torah when they are rolled up and kept in the Ark.
Rosh Ha-shanah	Hebrew: 'Head of the Year'. The Jewish New Year, which usually occurs in September. Blowing the shofar is an important part of the New Year service.
Seder	Hebrew: 'Order' The festive meal and service held in the home on the first night of Passover (and on the second night as well, outside Israel)
Shabbat (the Sabbath)	The seventh day of the week, and the day of rest, which begins on Friday at sunset, and lasts till nightfall on Saturday. It is the day when Jews should focus on worship, family and community, and abstain from all forms of work.
Shavuot	Hebrew: 'Weeks'. Shavuot or the Festival of Weeks is known to Christians as Pentecost. It occurs fifty days after Passover, and commemorates the arrival of the Children of Israel at Mount Sinai, where they received the Ten Commandments.
Shofar	The ram's horn that Jews blow at the service for the Jewish New Year, to make people aware of how important it is as a new beginning.
Siddur	The Jewish prayer book, written in Hebrew with an English translation, and some of the prayers are very ancient. Most of the religious service in the synagogue is in the Hebrew language, though the prayer for the Royal Family is always given in English. In Reform or Liberal communities more of the prayers are read in English.

Simchat Torah	Hebrew: 'Rejoicing of the Law', which is celebrated on the last day of Tabernacles. This marks the completion of reading the whole Torah, the Five Books of Moses, which takes a year. It is celebrated because it marks the point in time when the reading of the Torah can start all over again! It is a joyous occasion in the synagogue.
Sukkah	To celebrate the festival of Sukkot (Tabernacles), Jews construct a simple booth or hut, called a sukkah, which is often beautifully decorated with seasonal fruits that are hung from the roof covering. It is customary to eat your meals in the sukkah during the festival.
Sukkot	The Festival of Tabernacles. This is a harvest Festival of Thanksgiving, which occurs in the Autumn, after Yom Kippur, and lasts a week. It also commemorates the temporary shelters that the Children of Israel lived in when they spent forty years in the desert.
Synagogue	The word 'synagogue' comes from the Greek (literally 'a bringing-together'), and it means a 'meeting-place' or house of assembly.
Tallit	Often referred to as a 'prayer shawl', with fringes (Hebrew: tzitzit) at each corner, which is worn during prayer.
Tefillin	Before Orthodox Jewish men start to pray in the morning, they put on little leather boxes - tefillin (phylacteries) held on to their left arm and on their forehead by leather straps.
Torah	Literally, 'The Teaching', it describes the Pentateuch, often known as The Five Books of Moses. More generally, the term 'the written Torah' is used to describe the Hebrew scriptures as a whole.

Yad	The Hebrew word for a hand, it describes the pointer used when someone reads from the Torah, so that they can follow the text closely, and not lose their place.
Yom Kippur	Day of Atonement, which occurs ten days after Rosh Ha-shanah. It involves a fast from solid food and liquids, and it lasts approximately 25 hours. We pray the sins we have committed in the previous year will be forgiven, and we vow to do better in the year that has just started.

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