

Shabbat: What To Expect At A Synagogue

Contributed by InterfaithFamily.com

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The Sabbath is an every week holiday that was a revolutionary concept in the ancient world where only the rich and powerful had any leisure time. Today, in the frantic pace of the modern world it takes determination and discipline to accept this gift that God gave us. The Sabbath is both a home and synagogue celebration where the community comes together.

Why Is Shabbat On Friday And Saturday?

The first mention of Shabbat or the Sabbath comes in Genesis 2:2-3 in the form of a verb, shavat, which means "rested" in Hebrew.

On the seventh day God finished the work that God had made and God rested on the seventh day from all the work which God had made. And God blessed the seventh day and called it holy, and rested from all the work of creation which God made.

All Jewish days (including Shabbat) begin in the evening because of the pattern of God's creation:

And there was evening & there was morning; a first day. (Genesis 1:5)

What Should I Wear?

People generally wear business clothes and casual clothes that one would wear to a party or dinner. We turn our cell phones off as a courtesy to others before entering the sanctuary.

May I Bring My Children To Services?

Children are generally welcome in the sanctuary with their parents and often especially enjoy the songs at the beginning of services. During the more solemn parts of the service, children are expected to be quiet. In some synagogues, babysitting may be available; you may need to pre-register. Check the synagogue calendar for Tot Shabbat services, customized for families with young children.

When May I Enter Or Exit The Sanctuary?

As a mark of respect, we do not enter or exit when the Torah (scroll containing the Five Books of Moses) is being read, lifted or carried around the sanctuary, or when someone is giving a sermon or speech.

Where Do I Find A Prayer Book?

The prayer books may be given out by volunteers at the door before services or placed at the chairs or pews. A second book, the Chumash (from the word chamesh meaning five), contains the Torah readings in Hebrew and English. Since the Hebrew language reads from right to left, Hebrew books begin where an English book would end, with the first page where you would expect the last to be.

Do I Need To Wear A Head Covering Or A Prayer Shawl?

The tallit, or prayer shawl, is traditionally worn by Jewish men and boys (after their bar mitzvahs) and, in liberal congregations, by Jewish women and girls (after their bat mitzvahs). The braided fringes at the four corners of the tallit remind its wearer to observe the commandments of Judaism.

A kippah, or head covering (called a yarmulke in Yiddish), is traditionally worn by men and boys of all ages. In liberal synagogues, women and girls of all ages may also wear a kippah. Wearing a kippah is not a symbol of

religious identification like the tallit, but is rather an act of respect to God and the sacredness of the worship space. Just as men and women may be asked to remove their hats in a church, or remove their shoes before entering a mosque, wearing a head covering is a non-denominational act of showing respect.

If you wish to wear a kippah or tallit, you will find them by the entrance of the sanctuary. You do not have to be Jewish to wear a kippah or tallit. You may put on the kippah and tallit at any time during the service, but are generally requested to put on a kippah before entering the sanctuary.

What Is The Raised Area In The Sanctuary Called?

This is the bimah (pulpit) where the leaders of the services will stand. Behind the bimah is the aron ha'kodesh (holy ark) which contains the Torah scrolls (Five Books of Moses). Hanging from the ceiling in front of the ark is the ner tamid (eternal light) which burns constantly as a reminder of God's omnipresence.

I Don't Know Hebrew. How Will I Follow?

The service consists of both English and Hebrew readings. The Hebrew is often transliterated into English letters, helping those who do not read Hebrew to follow along. In some congregations, the service leader will indicate which prayers to read aloud as a congregation and which to read silently, and when to stand up and sit down. In many congregations, page numbers are announced so that you can easily follow.

Will I Be Expected To Participate?

You may read and sing along with the prayers when you are comfortable with them. You may notice that congregants are called up to the bimah to light the candles and say blessings over the wine on Friday night and to open and close the ark or recite blessings on Saturday morning. All these honors are pre arranged. In some congregations, guests are offered honors as a gesture of welcome. If you do not want to participate for any reason, you may simply decline.

During Saturday services, before and after reading of the Torah, the Torah is carried around the sanctuary in a procession with the rabbis and other service participants. You will see congregants touch their prayer shawls or their prayer books to the Torah and then kiss the prayer shawl or book. It is a custom symbolizing love and respect for the Torah. No one is obliged to do so.

What Is The Difference Between Friday Night & Saturday Morning Services?

Friday Night

Friday evening services are referred to as Kabbalat Shabbat (Receiving the Sabbath). This short service welcomes the Sabbath with songs and psalms, followed by evening prayers. In Reform and Reconstructionist synagogues, the Shabbat rituals of lighting the candles, blessing the wine and challah are included. Conservative and Orthodox Jews will light their candles at sunset at home. The rabbi may give a sermon or an interpretation (drash) on the Torah reading for the week. There may be a baby naming and/or a blessing for a couple before their marriage or commitment ceremony. Included in the prayers is a blessing for the healing of those who are ill. Near the end of the service a prayer (Kaddish) is said for those who are mourning the loss of a loved one and for those who are remembering a loved one who died at this time in a previous year (yahrtzeit). The prayer service ends with a song.

An oneg Shabbat (literally Sabbath delight) of challah, light treats and beverages usually follows the evening service. This gives everyone a chance to meet new friends and greet those we know.

Saturday Morning

Saturday morning services also begin with songs and psalms before the Sabbath prayers. As morning is a more intellectual time, the weekly portion of the Torah is read. If there is a bar or bat mitzvah happening, the

last paragraphs of the Torah portion are often read or chanted in Hebrew by the bar or batmitzvah. This first time reading the Torah and Haftorah (Prophets, Psalms and Writings) marks the beginning of their Jewish adulthood. They may also deliver an interpretation of that reading. The rabbi may add further interpretation. As in the evening service, new parents, engaged and committed couples, and those celebrating other life cycle events may also be blessed; prayers for those who are ill may be included. All prayer services end with memorial prayers followed by more songs. The worship service is ended with the Kiddush prayer, where wine serves to sanctify the Sabbath day. A light buffet lunch is often offered for all who have been at services. This is an informal time for newcomers, including interfaith families, to meet and talk with members, make new friends and get answers to their questions.

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