

Everything You Need to Know About Shabbat Services

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Introduction

Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, is a weekly holiday that celebrates creation and offers a respite from the hectic pace of the rest of the week. Shabbat begins at sundown on Friday and ends with Havdalah—a short ceremony that separates Shabbat from the rest of the week—on Saturday evening.

Many Jewish communities hold Shabbat services on both Friday night and Saturday morning (and sometimes also on Friday afternoon and on Saturday afternoon and evening). Each congregation is autonomous, although many are linked by their denominational affiliation. Reform congregations in North America are members of the Union for Reform Judaism.

Although each Shabbat worship service differs from the others (and every congregation does things its own way), there are some Shabbat customs, traditions, and practices observed in one form or another in synagogues and Jewish communities throughout the world.

Whether you attend services on Friday night or Saturday morning (or both), rarely, sometimes or often, these are some of the things you may see or hear in and around the synagogue (also known as a temple or a *shul*, which is a Yiddish word and often is used interchangeable with the other two).

Outside the Building

Although some congregations request the presence of local police officers or employ private security personal as a precaution at the door, anyone—regardless of belief or religion is welcome at worship services. Some congregations have outdoor worship space, where services may be held when the weather is warm.

In the Lobby

Ushers or greeters may welcome you as you enter the building, wish you a “Shabbat shalom” (a peaceful Sabbath), and offer you a prayer book. (In some congregations you’ll find the prayer books—and perhaps a volume of Torah commentary—in the pews when you take your seat.) Ushers can assist you if you need a large-print prayer book, a hearing loop, or have other needs related to a disability, and will work with you to ensure as much accommodation as possible.

In the lobby, you may see a variety of ritual items:

- Yarmulkes (*kippah* is the singular, *kippot* is the plural in Hebrew) or head coverings. Historically *kippot* were worn by Jewish men and boys during worship (and at other times) as a sign of respect to God. In Reform congregations today, both men and women—whether they are Jewish or from another faith or cultural tradition—wear *kippot* if they choose to do so as a sign of respect, spirituality or prayerfulness. If their *kippah* falls to the ground, some people will kiss it as they place it back on their head.

- *Tallitot*: only worn by Jewish teens (who have already become b'nai mitzvah) and adults; only worn on Shabbat and holiday mornings, with the exception of erev Yom Kippur (the start of Yom Kippur, which, like all Jewish holidays, begins at sundown) because it is the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. Like the *kippah* or yarmulke, prayer shawls are optional. Prayer leaders/clergy/rabbis/cantors may wear a tallit on Friday night; it distinguishes them as the service leader

Beyond *kippot* and *tallitot*, customs regarding dress vary from congregation to congregation (and standards for dress have loosened in recent times), it is best to avoid wearing shorts, tank tops, t-shirts, sweatshirts, athletic clothing, or flip flops to a worship service. “Business casual” for both men and women is an appropriate guide for Shabbat worship. Suits for men and dresses for women are appropriate when attending a bar or bat mitzvah or another celebratory event held in a synagogue sanctuary.

You may also see a Judaica shop in or near the lobby, but it likely will be closed if you are visiting on Shabbat. Such shops sell Jewish ritual objects such as Shabbat candlesticks, challah covers, and kiddush cups, as well as books and gift items.

In addition to being houses of worship, synagogues also are centers for education and community, so you may see offices, classrooms for children and adults, a social hall, or other community space.

Lastly, there may be a sign on the sanctuary door reminding worshippers to turn off all personal electronics (don't forget to turn off yours!) and noting that taking photographs is prohibited during worship.

In the Sanctuary

There may be ushers or greeters at the door of the sanctuary or worship space, but unless the service is extremely crowded, the ushers do not generally seat worshippers. Instead, seating is open, and worshippers can sit wherever they'd like. People most often sit with their families and friends, and there generally are no reserved seats. Visitors and first-time attendees should feel free to sit in any available seat or ask to join people who are already seated in a pew.

Some of the walls in the sanctuary may display plaques purchased in memory of members or relatives of members. Typically, these plaques are inscribed with an individual's name, date of birth, and date of death, all in both English and Hebrew. On the person's *yahrzeit* (anniversary of death), the small lightbulb next to the plaque will be illuminated, and his or her name will be read just before the *Kaddish* prayer is recited.

At the front of the sanctuary is the bimah (raised stage or platform from which a worship service is conducted), which generally includes these items:

- Ark (*Aron HaKodesh*): an enclosed space that houses Torah scrolls on which is hand-scribed the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, which Jews call “the Torah.” Torah scrolls are dressed in “attire” that mimics the garb of the ancient priests; the ark may include Hebrew writing (“Know before whom you stand” or other biblical phrases) or images of the 10 Commandments
- The *ner tamid* (eternal light) is generally located above the ark and remains lit as a sign of God's eternal relationship with humanity. In a different interpretation, the light is a representation of the fire used during the sacrifices in our people's ancient history
- A lectern or podium from which the Torah is read and where the service leaders may stand
- Spindles to hold Torah crowns when the Torah is in use
- Chairs for people who sit on the bimah, including service leaders, lay leaders (i.e., congregational president), bar mitzvah student and family; guests, speakers, etc.
- In some congregations, there may be flowers on the bimah, especially if the service includes a bar or bat mitzvah

During the Service

A rabbi, cantor (or in some instances a cantorial-soloist or song-leader), and/or a lay leader will lead the service from the bimah. The service follows a set structure that is generally consistent among congregations, but the readings and customs can vary widely.

The service will be conducted using a prayer book (*siddur*) in Hebrew and the local language. Many Reform congregations use the most recently published Reform prayer book, *Mishkan T'filah (Tent of Prayer)*, which includes traditional prayers in Hebrew, English phonetic transliterations, literal translations, and interpretive readings based on traditional prayer themes.

The prayer book may open from left to right because Hebrew is written from right to left. (English books open from right to left to accommodate English, which is written from left to right. Avoid putting the prayer book on the floor. If it is accidentally dropped, some people will kiss it when retrieving it from the ground, and at the end of the service as a sign of devotion and respect.

The prayer leader will announce the page numbers at regular intervals. If you get lost, it's okay to ask a neighbor the page. Some congregations use "visual *t'filah*" or visual prayer in which the liturgy is projected onto large screens throughout the sanctuary, so it is not necessary to refer to the prayer book. Instead, worshippers can look up, sing out, and participate by reading from the screen. When or not a prayer book is used, some of the readings may be responsive, with the prayer leader reading one section or line and the congregation responding with the next section or line, and so forth. You should feel free to participate as you are comfortable.

Shabbat Liturgy

In Reform congregations, Friday evening services often include Kabbalat Shabbat (Receiving the Sabbath), which comprises a selection of six psalms and the poem *L'cha Dodi* (focused on meeting the Sabbath Bride), combined with the evening (*ma'ariv*) service. Prayers that highlight the themes of God's creation of the world and God's redemption of the Jewish people from Egypt are the focus of the Shabbat liturgy. Because Shabbat is a day of rest for humanity and for God, prayers generally do not include requests of God, but rather praise for God.

On both Friday night and Saturday morning in most congregations, there will be a lot of music during the service. Much of it will be participatory (melodies can vary widely), but some is meant to be listened to, or as a backdrop to meditation or silent prayer. Sometimes a choir (which may be hidden behind a choir loft or plainly visible) will sing and often musicians will play various instruments—guitar, piano/keyboard, flute or others—to enhance the service. To the extent you're comfortable, feel free to join in reading and singing during the service.

Typically, the rabbi will share a sermon, *d'var Torah* (message about that week's Torah portion), or other, short teaching during the service.

On Friday night or Saturday morning, the worship service may incorporate one or more celebratory events:

- An *auf ruf*, a short ceremony for honoring and blessing a couple prior to their marriage
- A baby naming, to bestow a Hebrew name upon a child and welcome him or her into the Jewish community
- A conversion, at which a person who has chosen Judaism as his or her religion, publicly affirms this choice to the community

On Friday Night: Sitting, Standing, Bending, Bowing

Throughout the worship service, the prayer leader will direct the congregation about when to sit and when to stand (as people are able). If you are not familiar with the service, it is practical to follow what others are doing if you're able. Of course, if you are not able to rise or remain standing comfortably, you are not obligated to do so.

The congregation will be asked to rise at these points in the service:

- During the singing of the last verse of "*L'cha Dodi*," which perhaps has more melodies associated with it than any other liturgical text, the entire congregation will turn to the back of the sanctuary (or wherever the doors are located) and, when the ushers open the sanctuary doors, will bow to welcome the Sabbath Bride.
- For the *Bar'chu*, which is the call to prayer. It is customary to bow when reciting the first word, *Bar'chu*, and stand straight upon reciting the third word of the prayer, *Adonai*. (In some congregations, the ark will be opened for this prayer.)
- During the *Amidah* (Standing Prayer), which is the central portion of a Jewish worship service. The congregation may recite the beginning portion of this prayer together before continuing and concluding individually, in which case each congregant sits down when finished. Or, the entire prayer may be recited together, in which case the prayer leader will invite the congregation to rise for the *Amidah* and to sit when it is finished.
- Whenever the ark is opened. In some congregations, it is customary to read from the Torah on Friday nights, even though the traditional Torah-reading days are Monday, Thursday, and Saturday. The Torah service (explained more fully below) begins when the Torah is brought out of the ark and carried throughout the congregation so that worshippers can touch it as a sign of love and respect. The prayer leader will instruct the congregation to be seated once the Torah cover and the other decorative items have been removed from the scroll and the cover has been placed over the scroll as a sign of respect. After the scroll has been read, the congregation will rise as the Torah is dressed, and again when it is returned to the ark.
- For the *Aleinu* prayer, which often immediately follows the return of the Torah to the ark, so worshippers may already be standing at this point in the service.
- *Kaddish*: Includes the recitation of names of those who are being remembered because they have died within the last week (*shiva*) or month (*sh'loshim*), or because it is the yearly anniversary of their death (*yahrzeit*). Depending on the community's custom, congregants who are in mourning or observing a *yahrzeit* may be asked to rise (if they are comfortable doing so) when the name of their loved one is read. The leader may then invite others to add names of people they are remembering before everyone is asked to rise for the *Kaddish*.

Although it does not involve sitting or standing, at some point during the service (during the Torah service, if there is one in the congregation on Friday nights), the leader will read a list of names (mostly in English, although there may also be some names in Hebrew) and/or ask people to call out names of people who are sick and in need of healing—physical, spiritual, or emotional. After the names have been spoken, the congregation will recite or sing a prayer for healing which is known as the *Mi Shebeirach*.

On Saturday Morning: Sitting, Standing, Bending, Bowing

Throughout the worship service, the prayer leader will direct the congregation about when to sit and when to stand (as people are able). If you are not familiar with the service, it is practical to follow what others are doing if you're able. Of course, if you are not able to rise or remain standing comfortably, you are not obligated to do so.

The congregation will be asked to rise at these points in the service:

- For the *Bar'chu*, which is the call to prayer. It is customary to bow when reciting the first word, *Bar'chu*, and stand straight upon reciting the third word of the prayer, *Adonai*. (In some congregations, the ark will be opened for this prayer.)
- During the *Amidah* (Standing Prayer), which is the central portion of a Jewish worship service. The congregation may recite the beginning portion of this prayer together before continuing and concluding individually, in which case each congregant sits down when finished. Or, the entire prayer may be recited together, in which case the prayer leader will invite the congregation to rise for the *Amidah* and to sit when it is finished.
- For the *Aleinu* prayer, which often immediately follows the return of the Torah to the ark following the Torah service, so worshipers may already be standing at this point in the service.
- *Kaddish*: Includes the recitation of names of those who are being remembered because they have died within the last week (*shiva*) or month (*shloshim*), or because it is the yearly anniversary of their death (*yahrzeit*). Depending on the community's custom, congregants who are in mourning or observing a *yahrzeit* may be asked to rise (if they are comfortable doing so) when the name of their loved one is read. The leader may then invite others to add names of people they are remembering before everyone is asked to rise for the *Kaddish*.

The Torah Service

A central part of the Shabbat morning service is known as *Seder K'riat HaTorah* (Service for the Reading of Torah), which includes special prayers and songs that highlight the importance of Torah. Each week, Jews around the world read from the same parashah (portion) of Torah, making the Torah reading one of the key unifiers of time and message in the Jewish world. (Because Israeli Jews and many Reform communities celebrate some holidays according to the number of days specified in the Torah, which differs from the laws of later commentaries, there are some times during the year when Reform and Israeli congregations read a different parashah than other communities.)

When the Torah is brought out of the ark, the congregation rises while the scrolls are carried out into the sanctuary. This ritual is known as the *hakafah*, which means to circle or process, as in a processional. As the Torah is carried through the aisles, worshippers may touch their prayer book (or their hand or the end of their *tallit*) to the scroll and then kiss their hand or the object in a gesture of love and respect. Often the congregation sings while the Torah is paraded through the sanctuary. It is customary never to turn one's back to the Torah scroll, as it paraded throughout the congregation. At the end of the processional, the Torah is returned to the bimah, where it is undressed, opened, and rolled to the text to be read. Only once that process has been completed and the cover has been laid upon the undressed Torah (again, as a sign of respect) will the prayer leader instruct the congregation to be seated.

Depending on the congregation, there may be many Torah readers, usually ranging from one to eight readers. Before the first Torah reader begins, someone else is called from the congregation for an *aliyah* (which means he or she is called to the bimah to chant the blessings before and after reading from the Torah). At a bar mitzvah, the *aliyot* (plural of *aliyah*) often are given to family members, but they also may be chanted by members of the congregation.

If the service includes a bar or bat mitzvah, the young person will be the last one to read from the Torah, after which, in some congregations, it is customary to throw candy and sweets from the pews onto the bimah, showering the bar or bat mitzvah with "sweetness." He or she most likely also will offer a short *d'var Torah* (message, teaching, or interpretation about that week's Torah portion) during the service.

People who read from the Torah use a *yad*, (literally, hand; a silver pointer) in the shape of a hand, with the index finger pointing forward to keep their place in the text. *Yadim* (plural of *yad*) are used because Torah scrolls can be quite old, and the parchment can be easily damaged by the oils on readers' hands. Using a *yad* ensures that their hands don't touch the parchment and that they can mark their place as they read the Hebrew text. Worshippers can follow along as the Torah is read in the *Chumash* (a printed form of the Torah). In many congregations, copies of the Reform Movement's Torah Commentary can often be found in the pew and the service leader will announce the page on which the reading can be found.

In many congregations, these prayers are recited while the Torah is out of the ark:

- *Mi Shebeirach*, a prayer for healing for people whose names are called out by congregants and/or read by the service leader
- Prayer for Our Country
- Prayer for the State of Israel

After the Torah has been read, the Torah scroll is prepared to be returned to the ark. First, the service leader or a member of the congregation raises the open Torah scroll overhead and turns so the entire congregation can see the verses that were just read. This custom—known as *hagbahah* (to lift)—derives from a verse in the Book of Nehemiah that says: “And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people.” *G'lilah* (rolling together) follows, which includes tying the two scrolls together with the wimpel (a sash of linen or other material used to bind the two wooden spindles of a Torah together), replacing the cover, the crowns, and the *yad* before the scroll is displayed on a special stand on the bimah.

Following the Torah reading, the Haftarah is read. The weekly Haftarah (from the Prophets) reading (also found in the Torah Commentary), corresponds thematically to the Torah reading for the week. After the Haftarah reading, the Torah is returned to the ark.

Even if you enjoy the service tremendously, there is a strong taboo against applauding during a worship service because the experience is not a performance. Keep in mind, too, that in many sanctuaries use of personal electronics is prohibited, although in some, you can take photographs without flash.

After Services

At the end of the service, people will often greet one another informally as they move into a different space, often a social hall adjacent to the sanctuary, for refreshments and socializing. On Friday evenings, this period of time is known as the *oneg Shabbat* (Sabbath joy) and usually begins with the *Shabbat Kiddush* (blessing over the wine) and *HaMotzi* (blessing over bread or challah), although in some congregations, these blessings are recited from the bimah at the end of the service. On Saturdays and holidays, the reception following the worship service is known as the *Kiddush*, named for the prayer recited over wine or grape juice.

Everyone who attended services is invited and encouraged to stay to socialize, even if only briefly. Although it might seem intimidating to introduce yourself to someone new in such a setting, try sharing your name and a simple statement that this is your first time—or one of your first few times—visiting the congregation, and see where that takes you. Remember that others in the room may also be guests or infrequent attendees..

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