

Special Shabbats in the Hebrew Calendar

In the Hebrew calendar, certain Shabbats are designated with special names to commemorate events in the history of the Jewish community. These Sabbaths may include some additions to the liturgy as well as additional readings from either the Torah or the Prophets. Of the 13 “Special Sabbaths,” four of them have traditionally been assigned special readings during the Torah service. The following are six of the more important “Special Shabbats.”

1. *Shabbat Shuvah* (שַׁבַּת שׁוּבָה) – “Sabbath of Repentance”

This is the Shabbat that occurs during the Ten Days of Awe, the days between Yom Teruah (Rosh Ha-Shanah) and Yom Kippur. The name is derived from the special *haftarah* reading assigned for this Shabbat, i.e, Hosea 14:2 which begins “Return [שׁוּבָה], O Israel, unto the Lord.”

2. *Shabbat Shekalim* (שַׁבַּת שְׁקָלִים)

Shabbat Shekalim is the first of the four special Sabbaths, which are also called *Arba Parashiyot*, “the four pericopes, since an additional *parashah* is added to the readings on these Shabbats. Likewise, all four of these special Shabbats occur in the Spring. Shabbat Shekalim is observed on the Shabbat immediately preceding the month of Adar (in a leap year, Adar II). Exodus 30:11–16 is read, which includes the commandment regarding the donation of the half-shekel for the maintenance of the Tabernacle/ Temple. In ancient times, special messengers were dispatched to all Jewish communities to collect these donations (m.*Shekalim* 1.1)

3. *Shabbat Zachor* (שַׁבַּת זְכוֹר) – “Shabbat of Remembrance”

The second of the four special Sabbats, this is the Shabbat immediately before Purim. The name derives from the additional Torah *parashah* added to the readings (Deut 25:17–19) which commands that Israel remember what Amalek did to them when they came out of Egypt. Since Haman was a direct descendant of Agag, the king of the Amalukites, the commandment is fulfilled in the celebration of Purim in which the name of Haman is drowned out during the reading of the *Megillah*, the book of Esther.

4. *Shabbat Parah* (שַׁבַּת פָּרָה), “Shabbat of the Red Heifer”

This is the third of the four special Sabbats and is the Shabbat immediately preceding *Shabbat HaChodesh* (see next entry below). The additional Torah portion is Num 19:1–22 that describes purification by the ashes of the red heifer. Since participation in the Pesach festival required ritual purity for each individual, and since it was presumed that everyone had most likely contracted corpse impurity, Shabbat Parah was a reminder to plan one’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem to give sufficient time for the purification ritual (which required eight days).

5. *Shabbat HaChodesh* (שַׁבַּת הַחֹדֶשׁ)

This is the last of the special Sabbats, and it precedes or falls on the first day of the first month, that is, the month of Nisan, in which Pesach occurs. The additional Torah *parashah* is Ex 12:1–20, which reminded the Jewish community of the significant events that would shortly take place in their celebration of Pesach in Jerusalem. This special Shabbat, then, was a final reminder to be fully prepared for the upcoming Festival.

6. *Shabbat Nachamu* (שַׁבַּת נַחֲמוּ)

This is the Shabbat immediately following the Ninth of Av (*Tisha b’Av*), the day we remember and mourn the destruction of both the first and second Temples, as well as other calamities that have come upon our people. After the fast and mourning that characterizes *Tisha b’Av*, and additional *Haftarah* reading is added to the next Shabbat, a reading which promises comfort to the people of Israel. This additional reading is from Isaiah 40, which begins “Comfort (*nachamu*), Comfort my people.”