

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 Shabbats,” four of them have traditionally been assigned special readings during the Torah service. The following are six of the more important “Special Shabbats,” followed by a short description of the remaining seven “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 HaShanah) 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 Parashiyyot*, “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 Shabbats, 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 Amalikites, 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 Shabbats 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 Shabbats, 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*, an 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.”

Additional Special Sabbaths

7. *Shabbat Bereishit* (שַׁבַּת בְּרֵאשִׁית)
This is the Shabbat immediately following Simchat Torah (שְׂמֵחַת תּוֹרָה), which in the Annual Cycle of Parashot, the readings begin again, i.e., with Genesis which begins בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:
8. *Shabbat Hanukkah* (שַׁבַּת חֲנֻכָּה)
This is the Shabbat that falls within the 8 days of Hanukkah and there are special *haftarah* readings in the Annual Cycle of *parashot*. If there are two Shabbats in the 8 days of Hanukkah, the second is designated as *Shabbat Hanukkah*.
9. *Shabbat Shirah* (שַׁבַּת שִׁירָה)
This is the “Shabbat of Song,” which is the Shabbat on which Exodus 15:1–18 is read in the Annual Cycle of *parashot*, which includes the “Song of the Sea,” sung by Israel after crossing the Red Sea. The *haftarah* includes the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:2–31).
10. *Shabbat Hagadol* (שַׁבַּת הַגְּדוֹל)
This is the Shabbat before Pesach begins, commemorating the miracle that happened in Egypt and the Israelites preparing for the exodus. It is traditional from the community to go over the laws pertaining to Pesach in preparation for the moed, including a overview of the Pesach Haggadah.
11. *Shabbat Chazon* (שַׁבַּת חִזּוֹן)
This is the Shabbat which precedes Tisha B’ Av (תְּשֻׁעָה בְּאָב) the 9th of the month of Av, and is so designated in order to prepare the Shul for the coming day of fasting and mourning, for it was on the 9th of Av that both the first and second Temples were destroyed, as well as other disasters that befell with Jewish people.
12. *Shabbat Chol HaMoed* (שַׁבַּת כּוֹל הַמוֹעֵד)
In the Festivals of Pesach and Sukkot, the Sabbath that occurs within these festivals is called “Shabbat Chol HaMoed.” The normal Torah reading schedule is suspended and a selection relating to the Festival itself is read instead.
13. *Shabbat Mevarchim* (שַׁבַּת מְבָרְכִים)
“The Shabbat when we bless” is the Shabbat which precedes Rosh Chodesh, the beginning of a new month. It is traditional in the Synagogue on this Shabbat to recite the blessing for the new month and to announce the timing of the Rosh Chodesh.