





## WHAT'S THAT WORD?

The North American Association of Synagogue Executives (NAASE) is delighted to offer this synopsis of common Hebrew (and a few Yiddish) words you might hear around the synagogue, that perhaps are not yet familiar to you.

The meanings shown here aren't formal or complete, nor are the spellings universal. Perhaps, congregants might pronounce some of them differently. But the intent of this list is to assist you in understanding how the words and phrases are used in most everyday conversation in the synagogue office or building, or in the synagogue's publications. There is no need to memorize them . . . through repeated exposure, you will no doubt become familiar with them and accustomed to their use.

Your congregation rabbi and/or other Jewish educators on staff are very good resources, that you may wish to consult for explanation of meaning, specific usage or connotation. This document is intended to supplement those resources.

*We welcome suggestions for additional inclusions in future updates, sent to [Office@NAASE.org](mailto:Office@NAASE.org)*

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## ABOUT THE SYNAGOGUE . . .

KEHILLAH / KEHILLOT (pl)

The congregation(s)

MINYAN

The minimum number of people (10) needed to have a prayer service; frequently used to refer to the services themselves, especially the daily services

SHULE / SHUL

The synagogue

RABBI

The spiritual leader of the congregation

CANTOR

The leader of the services, especially on Shabbat and holidays

BEIT MIDRASH

Place of prayer or study; usually a sanctuary or chapel

TORAH

The bible; a large scroll with the Five Books of Moses in Hebrew

MEZUZAH

Small rectangular (or other shaped) box affixed to the doorpost, containing special extracts of sacred text

TALLIT

A prayer shawl worn at some services

KIPPAH / YARMULKA / KIPPOT (pl)

A round head covering (required of men, optional with women) usually owned by the individual, worn in any Jewish sacred space

MITZVAH / MITZVOT (pl)

Commandments regarding behavior and observation; in the vernacular, referring to good deeds

SHALOM

Peace, fulfillment; a general greeting appropriate to anyone at any time

SHABBAT SHALOM

A Sabbath greeting specifically, "A peaceful Sabbath"

SHAVUA TOV

"A good week", a greeting extended at the end of Shabbat as the new week begins

CHESED / GEMILUT CHESED

Acts of loving kindness, good deeds

TEFILAH / TEFILOT (pl)

Prayer

MAGEN DAVID

Shield of David, portrayed graphically as two overlapping triangles, one inverted atop the other, symbolizing the Jewish people

HALACHAH

Jewish Law; as interpreted for the individual congregation as needed, by its rabbi

TODAH / TODAH RABAH

"Thank you", "thank you very much"

MENORAH

A seven-branched candelabra, reminiscent of the device in the portable Sanctuary while traveling in the wilderness and then ultimately in the Temple; a Chanukiah is a menorah for use at Chanukah with nine branches

## RELATED TO FOOD . . .

KOSHER / KASHRUT

Acceptable to be eaten; more generally means acceptability for its intended purpose

MILCHIG / FLEISHIG / PAREVE

Milk-based or meat-based, or neither

MASHGIACH

The supervisor who insures the *kashrut* of food and preparation

HASHGACHA

The rabbinic authority (can be a person or an organization) that certifies the *kashrut* of food under their supervision, and vouches for the *mashgiach* they assign to the task

## RELATED TO LIFE CYCLE EVENTS . . .

MAZAL / MAZAL TOV

Luck or good fortune; an expression of congratulations

ALIYAH / ALIYOT (pl)

Being called up to the pulpit during the Torah service

BAR MITZVAH (m) / BAT MITZVAH (f) / BNAI MITZVAH (m pl) / BNOT MITZVAH (f pl)

A young man or woman at age 13, becoming responsible for their own Jewish commitments

MIKVEH

Ritual bath for religious purification; often used in conjunction with conversion

BRIS (BRIT) / BRIT MILAH

Ritual circumcision of a baby boy on the eighth day of life

MOHEL

The one who conducts/officiates at the brit milah (often a specially-trained rabbi)

MISHPACHAH

The family

CHUPPAH

The wedding canopy under which the ceremony takes place

KALLAH / CHATTAN

The bride and groom

AUFRUF / AUFRUFEN

On the Shabbat prior to the wedding, the groom (and sometimes the bride, as well) is "called up" to the Torah for an aliyah and to begin the communal celebration with well-wishes

SHIVA

A seven day period of mourning following the burial of a deceased family member

SHLOSHIM

The 30-day period following burial, with its limitation requirements

CHEVRA KADISHA

The burial society that discreetly and respectfully prepares the deceased for burial

YIZKOR

A memorial service, held four times a year

KADDISH

A memorial prayer, recited by an individual or the entire congregation

YAHRTZEIT

Annual commemoration of someone's passing; frequently observed at one of the regularly scheduled services, when Kaddish is recited

## **RELATED TO SERVICES . . .**

SHABBAT

The Sabbath (Saturday), which starts Friday evening at sundown

KIDDUSH

A prayer recited after services, followed by refreshments/collation

ONEG / ONEG SHABBAT

A social celebration on Friday evening or Saturday afternoon, with food, singing and sometimes study

MISHABERACH

A prayer asking for God's healing in someone's name

DAVEN / DAVENING

To engage in a prayer service; often refers to the one leading the service

PARSHAH (various spellings) / PARSHIOT (pl)

The Torah reading on Shabbat and holiday mornings is drawn from different sections of the Torah

KOHEN / LEVI / YISROEL

Special honors of being called up to the Torah during services (on Shabbat, holidays, Monday and Thursday mornings) are accorded to direct descendants of Aaron (the Kohanim) and to all other descendants of the biblical tribe of Levi (the priestly tribe, the Levi'im). All other honors go to Jewish individuals, regardless of descendancy.

HAFTORAH

A selection from the Book of Prophets read at services on Shabbat mornings and on certain holiday mornings

DVAR TORAH

“Words of Torah”, refers to a sermon or speech or Torah study; on Shabbat or holidays, but can be at any time the congregation or any group gathers

MA'ARIV

The evening service (technically the beginning of the next day)

SHACHARIT

The morning service

MUSAF

The additional service added to Shabbat and holiday morning services

MINCHA

The afternoon service

SIDDUR / SIDDURIM (pl)

General term of prayer books

CHUMASH / CHUMASHIM (pl)

Books contain the Torah, the Five Books of Moses

MACHZOR / MACHZORIM (pl)

Prayer books used on the High Holidays

BENTSCHING / TO BENTSCH / BIRKAT HAMAZON

Generally means praying; but specifically refers to the communal prayers of thanks recited after a meal, though some individuals do so even if eating alone (the prayer booklet is sometimes referred to as a *bentscher*)

MECHITZAH

Refers to “separation” of seating between men and women in Orthodox environments; sometimes an actual barrier or other separation structure; other times, dedicated/reserved seats or rows

## RELATED TO HOLIDAYS . . .

EREV

Evening; especially the evening before a particular day like a holiday or Shabbat

CHAG SAMEACH

A holiday greeting of good wishes

YOM TOV

A holiday in the Jewish calendar (technically, a “day of goodness”)

CHOL HAMOED

Intermediate days within some longer holidays (like Pesach, Sukkot)

ROSH CHODESH

The beginning day(s) of each Hebrew month

SELICHOT

The preparatory observance that begins the High Holiday cycle, usually in September, leading into Rosh Hashanah

SHOFAR

A ram’s horn, used as a trumpet-like instrument, at High Holiday services, historically used to announce the start of holidays and the new month

ROSH HASHANAH

The holiday that starts the New Year (in the Fall)

YOM KIPPUR

Part of the High Holiday sequence, the Day of Atonement

SUKKOT

The holiday in the Fall that reminds us of living in the wilderness

## SUKKAH

A basic temporary housing during the holiday of Sukkot, to emulate the booths lived in by the Israelites wandering in the desert, with make-shift walls and a see-through roof

## LULAV and ETROG

The lulav is a bundling of three types of branches (palm, willow and myrtle) and the etrog is a citrus-like fruit, usually yellow or green, that are used in a special part of the Sukkot services

## HOSHANA RABBAH

The seventh (last) day of the holiday of Sukkot

## SHMINI ATZERET

An eighth day of celebration, though distinct from the days of Sukkot and transitioning into Simchat Torah

## SIMCHAT TORAH

The holiday celebrating the conclusion of the annual cycle of reading from the Torah and immediately starting anew

## CHANUKAH

The winter Festival of Lights holiday celebrating the second century B.C.E. military victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian-Greeks and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem

## DREIDEL

A Yiddish name (“turning”) for a four-sided child’s toy, shaped like a top, with no religious significance, but associated with the family celebration of Chanukah; each side has a Hebrew letter on it, signifying “A Great Miracle Happened There”

## TU B'SHVAT

The fifteenth day of the Hebrew month of Shvat; the start of the season in which the earliest-blooming trees in the Land of Israel emerge from winter and begin a new fruit-bearing cycle

## PURIM

The Spring holiday that commemorates the saving of the Jews of ancient Persia from a royal edict of destruction, recorded in the biblical Book of Esther

## MISHLOACH MANOT / SHALACH MANOT

“Sending of Portions”, which refers to the traditional joyous gift-giving on Purim of baskets of food and drink, and perhaps including small celebratory gifts, accompanied by donations for the poor

## PESACH / PASSOVER

The holiday in the Spring commemorating the redemption of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt

## MATZAH

The unleavened, flat bread eaten on Passover, reminiscent of the bread baked hastily upon the freeing of the Israeli slaves from Egypt

## SEDER

Means “order of the service”, referring to the home ritual incorporating the festive meal on each of the first two nights of Passover (in Israel, only one night)

## LAG B'OMER

The eighteenth day of the Hebrew month of Iyar; Spring holiday with Kabbalistic roots, has historic significance

## SHAVUOT

The holiday in the Spring commemorating the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people

## TISHA B'AV

Summer fasting day commemorating great historic tragedies of the Jewish people

### THE THREE WEEKS

The period just before Tisha B'Av, recalling the destruction of both the First and Second Temples, when certain festive activities are limited

### YOM HA'ATZMAUT / INDEPENDENCE DAY

National holiday in Israel, commemorating the Israeli Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948

### YOM HA'ZIKORON

Israel's Memorial Day for the fallen soldiers of Israel and victims of terrorism

### YOM YERUSHALAYIM / JERUSALEM REUNIFICATION DAY

National holiday in Israel, commemorating the reunification of the "Old City" of Jerusalem in the Six Day War, on June 7, 1967

### YOM HA'SHOAH / HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY

Israel's and the world's Memorial Day for the victims of the Nazi holocaust (Shoah)

## RELATED TO EDUCATION . . .

### YESHIVA

A school of advanced Jewish learning

### GAN

Meaning "Garden", usually refers to the opening grade level for children in school

### ALEPH / BET / GIMEL / DALED / HEY / VAV / ZAYIN

The first seven letters of the Hebrew alphabet, often used to name the grades of a religious school

## RELATED TO ISRAEL . . .

### YERUSHALAYIM

The Hebrew name for Jerusalem

### KOTEL

The Western Wall, the remaining foundational wall for the Temple

### ALIYAH

Means "calling up", but refers to the obligation felt by Jews to actually live in Israel

### ZIONISM

The movement of the Jewish people that supports the re-establishment of a Jewish homeland and national state in the area defined as the historic Land of Israel.

## RELATED TO POPULAR SYNAGOGUE NAMES . . .

*(Some of these are nouns and others are adjectives . . . but we won't distinguish in this list)*

### ADATH / ADAT

"Congregation of"

### ANSHEI

"People of"

### BETH / BET

"House of"

### BETH EL

"House of God"

BNAI / B'NAI  
"Children of"  
BRIT / BRITH  
"The Covenant of"  
CHESED  
"Of goodliness, charity, kindness, love"  
CHAYIM  
"Life"  
ETZ  
"Tree of"  
EMUNAH  
"Faith, of Faith"  
KEHILAH / KEHILAT / KEHILOT (pl)  
"Congregation"  
KETER  
"Crown"  
NEVE / NEVEH  
"Oasis of"  
OHAV / OHEV / AHAVA / AHAVAT  
"Love of / Love for / Lovers of"  
OHR / OR  
"Light of"  
SHAAR / SHAAREI (pl)  
"Gates of"  
SHALOM / SHOLOM  
"Peace"  
SHEARITH  
"Remnant of"  
TEFILAH / TEFILOT (pl)  
"Prayer"  
TEMPLE (as part of the full name)  
Is used as a reference to the ancient Temple that stood in Jerusalem  
TIFERET / TIFERETH  
"Beauty of / Beautiful / Adornment of"  
TIKVAH  
"Hope of"  
YISRAEL  
"Israel"  
ZION / TZION  
Refers to Jerusalem or the entire land of Israel

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