



# A CIVIC SHABBAT

COMPANION



**"GUARD THE SABBATH TO KEEP IT HOLY"**  
(EXODUS 20:8)

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## WELCOME AND FOREWORD

The UK Jewish community has been established in the UK since Jews were readmitted to Britain in the mid-17th Century, building synagogues, communities and traditions over many generations.

We are proud of our heritage and culture as British Jews and we are always looking for opportunities to give others an insight into our way of life. This is why I am so delighted the Board of Deputies – the democratic and representative body representing British Jews since 1760 – is facilitating this opportunity for you to share a Shabbat with one of our Jewish communities.

Our synagogues are all keen to play their part in the wider community and so we are delighted that you have taken the time to visit. We want to share our faith, culture, and community, and to build and strengthen valuable networks and relationships with local leaders.

A key goal for my presidency of the Board of Deputies is to make our Jewish community ever more outward-looking and deepen relationships with our neighbours. This includes building an 'Optimistic Alliance' with British Muslims that seeks to challenge prejudice and extremism and build cooperation on shared priorities. We are also emphasising interfaith work with Christian denominations, and strengthening our ties to Hindu, Sikh, and other minority faith communities, to overcome divisions, build community cohesion, and advance shared concerns and interests.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Phil Rosenberg".

**Phil Rosenberg**  
President

This Civic Shabbat is a wonderful opportunity to build ties and introduce you to our Jewish culture and traditions. We look forward to new friendships and deeper understanding.



## MODERN ORTHODOX

Modern Orthodox Judaism also believes that the Torah (and the oral tradition) is the direct word of God given at Mount Sinai. Halacha is considered binding, but rabbis are regularly called upon to decide how to apply Jewish law to ever-changing modern life, and modern Orthodox Jews embrace the modern world and secular culture and learning. Traditions vary depending on where people live around the world, but they are united in the essential belief in Torah from Mount Sinai. Men and women have different roles and commitments required of them by Jewish law. For example, usually only men serve as rabbis and lead synagogue services. However, both men and women are leaders and teachers in Modern Orthodox communities.

## HAREDI

Sometimes called 'Strictly Orthodox'. This includes many different groups, including Ḥasidic Jews. These groups are often recognisable due to their traditional styles of dress. Halacha (Jewish law from the Torah and accompanying oral tradition) is seen as given directly from God and strictly binding. Torah law and tradition affects every action taken throughout the day. Many communities will also follow the teachings of a particular rabbi. Ḥaredi Jews embrace traditional values and to varying degrees limit their exposure to contemporary secular culture. Ḥaredi life is centred around study of Jewish teachings, strict observance of Shabbat and festivals and sharing joyous family events.

## CULTURAL

Not all Jews identify religiously. They may have a strong Jewish identity which is based on shared history, culture and experiences. They see themselves as secular, cultural or ethnic Jews and may participate in some Jewish traditions, for example, having a Passover seder to celebrate the Jews' historic freedom from slavery.



## MASORTI

Masorti Jews are committed to halacha (Jewish law) but believe the Jewish tradition evolved over time and should continue to gradually evolve to meet the needs of a changing world. Masorti Judaism believes in being inclusive and welcoming, questioning, and open-minded. Most Masorti synagogues are egalitarian, offering equal opportunities for women and men to lead and take part in the service. Women are recognised as rabbis across the Masorti movement. Jewish learning is one of Masorti Judaism's highest values. Every Jewish person should have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of Jewish thought, history and culture, and to develop the ability to read and explore Jewish texts for themselves.

## PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM

In 2025, Britain's Reform and Liberal communities took the historic decision to unite in a single body called Progressive Judaism, reflecting the commonality of their outlooks. Reform and Liberal Jewish streams aim to help Jews balance their Judaism with being a full part of modern society. Reform and Liberal Jews see the Torah as inspired by God but written down by humans and therefore not the literal 'word of God'.

There are notable differences between the prayer liturgy of Progressive Judaism synagogues and that of Orthodox and Masorti services.

Many more prayers are said in English, and in some cases musical instruments are used. These congregations are fully egalitarian, with men and women sitting together for services and women serving as rabbis. In addition, whereas traditional halacha counts an individual as Jewish based on matrilineal descent, Reform and Liberal Jews equally regard those with only Jewish fathers as Jewish. Progressive Judaism places a particularly strong focus on issues of wider social concern including equality, human rights and looking after the environment. It stresses that tradition and text as well as knowledge of the wider world should help people create their own opinions and make informed choices about their Jewish practice. Progressive prayer books have updated the language used in prayers and blessings to be inclusive of everyone, including when referring to God.



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## WHAT IS SHABBAT?

The Sabbath day is known in Hebrew as Shabbat (the traditional Sephardi and Mizrahi pronunciation) or Shabbos (the traditional Ashkenazi pronunciation). It lasts from sunset on Friday evening until sunset on Saturday evening and is the main event of the week for practising Jews. The word Shabbat literally means to 'cease' – stop and rest (from work and creative activities).

Shabbat for many is a chance to also have a digital detox. The late Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks said, "The Torah is God's word, and just as God transcends time so does His word. It would be absurd, for instance, to suppose some human being more than three thousand years ago could have foreseen smart phones, social media and being online, on-call, 24/7. Yet Shabbat speaks precisely to that phenomenon and to our need for a digital detox once a week. God speaks to us today in the unsuspected inflections of words he spoke thirty-three centuries ago".

The different groups within Judaism 'rest' in different ways on Shabbat. Orthodox Judaism defines rest by the 39 'melahot' – activities considered to be creative work, that must strictly be avoided on Shabbat. For stringently observant members of these communities this will include not operating electrical devices including light switches and mobile phones, and not driving a car or travelling long distances. Masorti Judaism will also be guided by these rules, whereas Progressive Judaism allows individuals more flexibility in defining for themselves how they prefer to make Shabbat restful. What all groups will agree on is that Shabbat is a time for family, friends, reflecting on the week and good food!

## CUSTOMS & RITUALS FOR SHABBAT IN THE HOME

Traditionally Jews light two candles on a Friday evening in the home to mark the beginning of Shabbat. The candles are lit before Shabbat starts because lighting a fire is forbidden on Shabbat (one of the 39 categories of 'creative work' traditionally avoided on Shabbat).

ברוך אתה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קָרָשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ וְזֹנְנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ נָרֶךְ שְׁבָת

**Blessed are You, God, Ruler of the universe, who sanctified us with the commandment of lighting Shabbat candles.**

In some families, parents bless their children on Friday night with an ancient blessing. The words are taken from the priest's blessing found in the Torah (Numbers 6), including: 'May God bless you and protect you' and 'May God show you kindness and grant you peace'.

**For boys, the introductory line is:**

May you be like Ephraim and Menashe.

*Yesimcha Elohim k'Ephraim v'chi-Menashe.*

בָּשָׂרֶךָ אֱלֹהִים כָּאָגִים לְכָנָשָׂה

**For girls, the introductory line is:**

May you be like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.

*Yesimech Elohim k'Sarah Rivka Rachel v'Leah*

בָּשָׂרֶךָ אֱלֹהִים כָּשָׂרָה וּרְכָה וּלְאָהָה

**For both boys and girls, the rest of the blessing is:**

May God bless you and protect you.

*Yivarechecha Adonai v'yishmerecha*

בָּתְרַכָּה וְתַהְתַּה לְשָׁבָת

May God show you favor and be gracious to you.

*Ya'er Adonai panav eilecha vichuneka*

וְאֶרְאֶתְהָ פָּנָיו אֶלְיךָ וּוְתַחַנָּה

May God show you kindness and grant you peace.

*Yisa Adonai panav eilecha v'yasem lecha shalom*

וְשָׁא בְּהָנָה פָּנָיו אֶלְיךָ וְיִשְׁמַע לְבָךְ שָׁלוֹם

A Friday night family "Shabbat dinner" is a central moment in the week for many Jewish families. It begins with a traditional blessing over wine, called "Kiddush". The text describes the creation of the world in six days and God resting on the seventh day.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בָּרוּךְ הוּא

**Blessed are You, God, Ruler of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the vine.**

The Shabbat meal begins with two loaves of hallah – a delicious, sweet, plaited bread.

The blessing made over the bread is called "Ha'motzi." The two loaves are symbols of the two portions of manna (food which according to the Torah was provided by God to the Israelites in the desert after the exodus from slavery in Egypt) that were collected on Fridays to last over Shabbat.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בָּרוּךְ הוּא

**Blessed are You, God, Ruler of the universe, who creates bread from the earth.**

Havdalah (Hebrew for 'separation') is a ceremony to mark the end of Shabbat. A blessing over wine, lighting a candle (with many wicks) and smelling sweet spices are done to use all five senses to reawaken us for the new week. People wish each other 'shavuah tov' – a good week to come.

## THE SYNAGOGUE

The synagogue is not only a place for prayer services but also a space to come together as a community. The Hebrew for synagogue is Beit Knesset (House of Gathering). In addition to the prayer space it may include classrooms, a kitchen, a community centre or rooms for social events. Many Ashkenazi Jews use the Yiddish word shul (meaning 'school', reflecting the use of the space for gathering to learn Torah). Jewish prayer services traditionally require at least ten adult members to be present, so the community aspect is also central to the religious experience.

Many features of the synagogue space and the prayer service echo features of the Temple in ancient Jerusalem which was the focal points of Jewish worship until its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE.

Torah scrolls containing the Torah (the Five Books of Moses) are usually kept in a special cupboard at the front called the Aron HaKodesh (Holy Ark). Above the Ark is a lamp called the Ner Tamid (Everlasting Light). It is a reminder of the menorah (seven-branched lamp) that was constantly lit in the Temple, showing that God is always present. The synagogue is always built facing towards Jerusalem (facing east from the UK).

A chapter of the Torah is read out loud in synagogues each week on Shabbat and on many festivals. Orthodox and Masorti communities have public Torah readings on Monday and Thursday mornings as well. The Torah is placed on a platform called the bima (Ashkenazi name) or teba (Sephardi name) to be read. In Orthodox and most Masorti synagogues, the platform is in the middle, facing the ark. In Reform and Liberal synagogues, the platform is typically near the ark, facing the community.

In Progressive and some Masorti communities, men and women sit together for prayer services. In Orthodox (and other Masorti) synagogues, men and women sit separately for prayer. Older synagogues were often built with a 'ladies' gallery' upstairs and men's seating downstairs. However, in more modern buildings, men often sit on one side of the space and women on the other, separated by a partition called a meḥitza.

Most prayers are said or sung in Hebrew and can be read from a siddur (prayerbook), which also includes a full English translation. The spiritual leader of a community is called a rabbi. This means 'teacher'. Traditionally most prayers are said in Hebrew but prayer in all languages are acceptable! One prayer that will always be said in English is the 'Prayer for the Royal Family', which is made each Shabbat after the reading from the Torah.

There are traditionally three prayer times each day: Shaharit – morning, Minha – afternoon and Ma'ariv (Ashkenazi name) or Aravit (Sephardi name) – evening. The exact timings for these vary according to season and daylight hours. There is an extra, fourth prayer service called Mussaf, which immediately follows the shaharit service on Shabbat.

Prayer services can be led by a rabbi, 'hazan' (cantor) or any competent adult member of the community.

The service includes some special prayers said after the recitation from the Torah.

**A prayer for the King and the Royal Family** is said in English, and reflects the commitment and love of British Jews for the UK.

**A prayer for the State of Israel** reflects the special cultural and religious bonds of diaspora Jews with Israel, which for most British Jews includes also close personal and family ties. This prayer for Israel stresses the desire for a future of peace.

**A prayer for Hostages:** on October 7th October 2023, Hamas terrorists infiltrated Israel, murdering 1,200 innocent men, women, and children and taking 251 people hostages. Communities instituted special prayers for the return of the hostages, including a traditional text called Aheinu, which calls for the release of those in captivity.

## WAYS TO WORK TOGETHER IN THE FUTURE AND A VOTE OF THANKS

Thank you so much for joining us for our community's special Civic Shabbat. It is our pleasure to welcome you into our synagogue and to share with you the values, traditions, and spirit that define our community.

We look forward to building on this connection in the months and years ahead. We are eager to explore ways to foster mutual respect, and strengthen the inclusive, outward-looking ethos that we all strive to uphold.

Your visit is not just a moment of shared reflection and solidarity, but a powerful reminder of what we can achieve when we work together. Thank you once again for your time, your partnership, and your friendship.





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