Rabbinic Festivals

There are Jewish festivals that are not biblical in nature. These festivals do not have the Sabbath restrictions and one may work and attend uni on them.

These festivals include Chanukah (Festival of Lights), celebrated approximately in November/December. This celebrates an ancient victory by the Jewish religion over an attempt to Hellenise the holy temple in Jerusalem, which took place in approximately the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE. The successful campaign against Hellenism, culminated with the victors lighting the ancient candelabra (known as a menorah) in the Jerusalem Temple with enough holy oil to last for one day, but which miraculously lasted for eight days. Thus, there are eight days of Chanukah and a menorah is lit in every Jewish household for each day of Chanukah.

An other rabbinic festival occurs approximately in February/March known as Purim, meaning lots or dice. Around the 5th century BCE, the Persian Jewish community was threatened by a decree of extermination by one hostile influential personality in Persia. The festival is so-named because he cast lots or dice to determine the date to exterminate the Jewish people. The biblical Book of Esther, which is read on this day in synagogues and often to Jewish students on campus recounts the story and the miraculous salvation that came to the Jewish people. It is celebrated by exchanging gifts and wearing fancy costumes and having great parties.

There are several fast days in the Jewish calendar apart from Day of Atonement. These fast days usually only last from morning till evening and are mostly connected with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. One fast day on which observant Jewish students will not attend uni at least until midday is another twenty-five hour fast known as Tisha B’Av. This fast marks the anniversary of the actual destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem, as well as the dispersion of the Jewish people. This is usually around July/August.

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Jewish Holyday Holidays

If your more observant Jewish friends are not at uni for some lectures during the year, or if they are unable to sit for exams on certain days, the following may enlighten you as to why:

For observant members of the Jewish faith, the weekly Sabbath (Friday sunset to Saturday night with the appearance of three stars), and on all biblical festivals, no work maybe done. What is meant by work? Work includes 39 ancient skills required for the building of the portable tabernacle which was used for worship during the forty-year sojourn in the desert by the Children of Israel. Today, these types of skills/work have been replaced by more modern methods, but today these are also disallowed on the Sabbath—e.g. during the time of the tabernacle people engraved their messages and today they use a pen. Thus, writing is disallowed on the Sabbath day. In ancient times, creating fire was disallowed on the Sabbath and still is, but in modern times, similar effects of lighting fire such as turning on electricity, igniting the spark plugs of your car, cooking and boiling foods, etc, are prohibited on the Sabbath. Apart from the prohibited Sabbath skills, Jewish people must also try to desist from general secular activity so that it is truly a holy day dedicated mainly to spirituality and the family. Due to all of these reasons, you would not find your observant Jewish friends attending uni on the Sabbath or able to sit exams.

The same rules of the prohibited skills of Sabbath apply to all the biblical holy days in the Jewish calendar, with the exception that on the biblical holy days, unlike the Sabbath, one can cook and boil food, as long as the electricity is turned on, or fire ignited before the festival.

The following are the biblical festivals:

Passover (Hebrew Pesach) - approx March/April

This festival commemorates the exodus of the Jewish people after hundreds of years of Egyptian slavery (approximately 1800 to 1250 BCE). It is celebrated outside Israel for eight days. The first two and last two days are observed as Sabbath days. The middle four days are semi-festive and one may, with certain minor restrictions continue normal work, as well as attend unি. Observant Jewish people do not eat bread or any food that has been leavened during this time. You may notice that some of your Jewish friends will eat matzah (unleavened bread) instead of bread, which looks very much like a wafer. This symbolises the haste in which the Jewish people had to leave Egypt as they did not have time to bake bread or let any yeast rise in any of their food.

Pentecost (Hebrew Shavuot) - approx May/June

This is the anniversary of the giving of the Ten Commandments and the Divine Law (Torah) to Moses and the Jewish people at Mt Sinai. The festival lasts for two days outside Israel and one day in Israel. Both days are observed as Sabbaths.

Jewish High Holydays—approx September/October

The Jewish New Year (Hebrew Rosh Hashanah). This festival, according to Jewish tradition, is the anniversary of the creation of the world and Jewish people gather in the synagogue in order to pray for the peace and welfare of every citizen of G-d’s universe. The ram’s horn, known as the shofar, is blown in the synagogue to symbolically re-coronate G-d as King of the Universe, as they would do at the coronation of human kings in biblical times. Both in and outside Israel this festival is observed for two days, both of which are observed as Sabbaths.

Day of Atonement – (Hebrew Yom Kippur).

This is referred to in the bible as “The Sabbath of Sabbaths”. It is a full 25 hour fast. Jewish people do not partake of any food or drink on this holy day and concentrate on communal atonement for any wrong doing through prayer and repentance in an all day service at the synagogue.

Festival of Tabernacles - (Hebrew Succos).

This festival commemorates G-d’s divine protection of the Children of Israel, when they left Egypt and wandered in the desert for 40 years before entering the Promised Land of Israel. This is recognised by eating for eight days of the festival in a flimsy hut, known as a succah, whose roof is usually made of palm leaves. Some also sleep in the succah for the eight days. The first two days of the festival, as well as, the last two days are observed as Sabbaths. The middle four days, like Pesach are semi-festive, where again, ordinary activity, with a few minor restrictions is allowed. Your observant friends on campus, during these four middle days might not be able to eat their lunch with you, as at other times, if there is no succah (palm leafed hut) on campus.