
JEWISH FAMILY LIFE AND CUSTOMS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE



BOARD OF DEPUTIES OF
BRITISH JEWS
ADVOCACY FOR THE COMMUNITY

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The Board of Deputies of British Jews is the voice of the UK's Jewish community – advocating on a range of issues from religious freedoms to counter-extremism, Holocaust restitution to interfaith dialogue, and ties with Israel. We engage with Government and Parliament, the media, the diplomatic community and other groups in society to ensure the Jewish community's concerns are heard. On education we work to ensure that Jewish schools and education are protected and that non-Jewish institutions have access to accurate information on Judaism and the Jewish people.

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet has been produced by the Family Law Group of the Board of Deputies of British Jews to provide information concerning the requirements of practising Jews in the United Kingdom.

Religious observance varies amongst Jews of different affiliations (Orthodox, Masorti, Reform and Liberal). Even within the different affiliations, personal religious observance may well vary and the needs of Jewish clients can differ widely.

This booklet provides general guidance only, and each individual may well have specific needs, or want to seek specific religious guidance.

In this booklet we deal principally with Orthodox Jews whose level of observance and interpretation of Jewish law may be stricter than others. Reference is also made to the practices of Masorti, Reform and Liberal communities where appropriate. The websites/telephone numbers of different affiliations are given at the end of this booklet.

Families are an important building block of society and Jewish law and tradition highlights the centrality of the Jewish family. Judaism recognises the importance of the parent-child relationship, with each parent contributing to their children's religious, educational, emotional, social and material needs. It is also important that all parents have the opportunity to give their children 'quality time'. As certain commandments are incumbent on men and others are incumbent on women, a child may only have a full Jewish experience if he or she witnesses both the mother and father (or other male and female role-models) practising Judaism. Where only one parent is Jewish, more effort may be required to give children a full Jewish experience.

Jewish tradition highlights the importance of family ties. In cases of separation or divorce, maintaining contact with both parents will be desirable, wherever possible, to enable the child to sustain relationships with both sets of grandparents and other relatives.

It is important for children to be able to experience life cycle events (their own, those of relatives and those within the community). This will be facilitated by exposure to family and social networks of both parents. These events will

include weddings, circumcisions of boys (brit milah) and the naming ceremonies of girls, as well as bar mitzvahs (boys) and bat mitzvahs/bat chayils (girls) when Jewish children come of age (13 for a boy and 12 or 13 for a girl) and take on the responsibilities of being a Jewish adult.

SABBATH AND FESTIVAL OBSERVANCES

SABBATH

It is difficult to stress sufficiently the centrality and the binding nature of the Sabbath and festival laws for observant Orthodox Jews. For an observant Jew there can be no compromise and there is no mechanism for granting dispensation. However, where there is a possible risk to life or when family members or children require emergency medical attention, the laws of Sabbath and festivals must be set aside.

The Sabbath (Shabbat) is of particular importance in a Jewish home. Jewish law requires Jews to refrain from various acts of 'work' on the Sabbath, in commemoration of God's cessation of creativity on the seventh day of creation. The prohibited acts of 'work' include travelling (other than on foot), cooking, writing, carrying, the switching on and off of electricity, using a telephone and any transaction of a commercial nature, such as shopping.

For these purposes, festival laws are almost indistinguishable from Sabbath laws. Where this booklet talks about Sabbath observance, festival observance is included.

TIMING OF THE SABBATH

The Sabbath starts on Friday about one hour before nightfall, or 15 minutes before dusk. Thus, a practising Jew needs to leave work, school, or anywhere else, in sufficient time to arrive home before the onset of the Sabbath. At its earliest, Sabbath begins in midwinter at around 3:30pm throughout the UK and can end as late as midnight in midsummer. However, these times vary depending on date and exact location. The Sabbath lasts for approximately 25 hours from the time it commences. Communities may "bring in the Sabbath early" in summer for convenience, thereby extending it beyond 25 hours.

TIMING OF FESTIVALS

Like the Sabbath, the festivals also always commence immediately before dusk on the previous day and the comments in the previous paragraph also apply. People who intend to spend the Sabbath or festival together will need to arrive in the place where they wish to spend the Sabbath or festival before this time, unless they live within walking distance from one another. Festivals can fall on any day of the week but it is extremely unusual for all 13 festival days to fall on weekdays in the same year. The English calendar dates of festivals vary from year to year, in accordance with the Jewish lunar calendar.

In addition to the Sabbath, outside Israel there are a total of 13 holy or festival days in the Jewish calendar:

Festival	Time of Year	Number of Festival Days
Pesach (Passover)	March / April	Two sets of two days separated by four semi-festive days (two sets of one day for Reform and Liberal communities separated by five semi-festive days)
Shavuot (Pentecost)	May / June	Two days (one day for Reform and Liberal communities)
Rosh Hashanah (New Year)	September / October	Two days (one day for Reform and Liberal communities)
Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)	September / October	One day
Succot (Tabernacles)	September / October	Two sets of two days (two sets of one day for Reform and Liberal communities) separated by six semi-festive days
In addition there are the following minor festivals:		
Purim (Lots)	February/March	One day – travel/work permitted
Chanukah/Hannukah (Festival of Lights)	November / December	Eight days – travel/work permitted

There are also six fast days in total, but work/travel is only prohibited on Yom Kippur.

ROLE OF RABBI

The role of the rabbi is often more extensive than that of a pastoral carer, teacher and mediator. They decide questions of Jewish law and may act as an arbitrator. If a rabbi is asked a question on Jewish law, their answer binds the questioner. Some communities turn to the rabbi or the courts of Jewish religious law (beth din, plural batei din) for determination of civil issues.

PRAYER

Adult men and boys over the age of 13 may wish to pray three times a day, in the morning, afternoon and evening. While many prayers can be performed individually, observant Orthodox Jewish men may prefer to attend synagogue and pray with a quorum of at least 10 men present (a minyan). Such group prayer is particularly important when a person is in a period of mourning (see section on bereavement and mourning). Afternoon prayers commonly take place at lunchtime during the winter months.

EDUCATION

Judaism lays great emphasis on the duty to educate children. Many families will prioritise time and funds for their children's religious and secular education.

FOOD

Observant Jews are required to eat only kosher food. This means that while all fruit, vegetables and grains are generally permitted, only certain meat, fish and poultry are allowed. Jews who strictly observe the dietary laws (including religious slaughter laws) require all food (including cheese and wine) to be manufactured and prepared under rabbinical supervision in order to be satisfied that no prohibited ingredients have been used. Consequently, vegetarian or vegan cooked food may also be refused.

There are strict additional rules for the preparation and service of food at home where meat and milk products are required to be kept separately. Note that, as in all areas, there are many different levels of religious observance. The individual's specific requirements should be discussed with them on a personal basis. There are additional restrictions during the festival of Passover, and specific guidance should be sought.

CLOTHING

Observant Jewish men may keep their heads covered at all times, generally by wearing a skull cap (known as a yarmulke, kappel or kippah), and sometimes also a hat. Some will have tassels hanging from their clothing at the waist (tzitzit). For prayer they wear a white, or sometimes coloured, garment round their shoulders (a tallit). Observant married women may cover their hair with a hat, scarf, or a wig at all times in public. Such women and girls over the age of 12 may only wear modest clothing and many will not wear trousers, short skirts or short sleeves. Some observant men and women restrict their contact with members of the opposite sex if they are not married or related to them.

LIFE EVENTS

BIRTH - BOYS

Boys are circumcised (brit milah) at eight days old or as soon as possible thereafter if there are medical reasons for delay. The circumcision is carried out by a mohel (plural mohelim) who is registered to carry out this procedure by the Initiation Society or the Association of Reform and Liberal Mohelim. Some mohelim are also registered medical practitioners. Boys are named at this procedure. Frequently, a boy's name is not announced until the circumcision.

If the firstborn child in a family is a boy he is formally 'redeemed' by his father at 31 days at a ceremony known as a pidyon haben. In certain communities, on a boy's third birthday he will have his first haircut, known as an upschernish or upscherin. This rite of passage begins his religious education.

BIRTH - GIRLS

Girls are usually named in the synagogue, often on the Sabbath following the birth.

Any form of female genital mutilation is strictly prohibited.

BAR MITZVAH / BAT MITZVAH (BAT CHAYIL)

Boys are recognised as full members of the community at 13 when they celebrate their bar mitzvah. Girls reach this stage at 12 or 13, depending on their community, when they celebrate their bat mitzvah (also known as a bat chayil). Both boys and girls have a period of intense study during the year leading up to the occasion. Traditionally, children are expected to attend Sabbath services regularly with their parents. In Orthodox communities boys, in particular, accompany their fathers.

MARRIAGE

The events of birth, bar mitzvah/bat mitzvah and marriage are all cause for great celebration.

Where possible, both parents of a bride and groom are expected to stand with their child during the marriage ceremony under the marriage canopy (chuppah). Grandparents may also be present under the chuppah.

Weddings between heterosexual Jews can take place in synagogues or elsewhere, including private homes. In England and Wales, synagogues have marriage secretaries who keep the civil and religious marriage records, ensuring that they comply with civil laws. In Scotland there is no such position, and the officiant acts as the Registrar and must sign the register.

Prior to the wedding being celebrated, the rabbi must ensure that religious law is followed and that the marriage is one that is permitted by Jewish law.

It is possible for two Jews to have an entirely civil or entirely religious marriage. However, a religious Jewish marriage ceremony carried out without a civil marriage is not recognised as valid in civil law. Most Jews marrying in the UK have a combined ceremony satisfying both religious and civil law. Sometimes the religious and civil marriages take place on different days. When this happens the couple may decide not to live together until after the religious marriage.

In some strictly Orthodox communities, marriages may be arranged, subject to the consent of both parties. This may occur at a young age but in accordance with the civil law.

Religious marriages may not be performed during certain periods of the Jewish calendar.

The validity of any marriage celebrated in another country is a question of fact which will need to be checked in accordance with the relevant civil law. Essentially, if the country in which the marriage has been celebrated recognises that it is valid, UK law will probably accept it as a valid civil marriage. Generally, the only overseas Jewish marriage which could be recognised without an accompanying or prior civil ceremony is one performed by the Official Rabbinate in Israel, where there is no separate civil marriage.

In addition to a civil marriage certificate, the parties receive a religious marriage document called a ketubah, which belongs to the wife. This document is signed by two Jewish witnesses to the marriage. It will need to be produced upon application for a religious divorce (get). It may also be required as proof of the Jewish identity of any child born of that marriage and their future descendants.

A central theme of marital life is that of family purity. As part of a complete intimate relationship, observant Orthodox couples are expected to refrain from physical contact at certain times of the wife's monthly menstrual cycle. Seven days after the conclusion of her monthly period, an Orthodox woman may attend a ritual bath (the mikveh) before a couple fully resumes their relationship.

In Orthodox communities, if a married man dies childless, his brother (if any) must perform a ceremony of chalitzah before a beth din to enable the widow to remarry. Until then, the widow is forbidden to remarry. In any event, no widow may marry within 90 days of the death of her husband.

As in civil law, there are a number of categories of prohibited marriages although the list is not exhaustive and religious guidance should be sought. The civil law has extended its provisions – originally it permitted only heterosexual couples to marry in religious (including civil) ceremonies. Since the coming into force of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, in England and Wales, and the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014 in Scotland, civil law permits same-sex couples to marry in religious communities which have opted to perform them. The Northern Ireland Executive has stated that it does not intend to introduce such legislation, but same-sex couples who have married in religious ceremonies in other jurisdictions are treated in civil law as having civil partnerships.

The Civil Partnerships Act 2004 came into force in December 2005 and endowed the couple who went through a civil partnership ceremony with legal rights and remedies previously only enjoyed by heterosexual couples.

In the Jewish community, only the Reform and Liberal movements currently perform same-sex marriages. Some Masorti synagogues perform shutfut (partnership) ceremonies for same-sex couples. This is not at present recognised as a Marriage or a Civil Partnership in English law. While, in 2016, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis urged communities under his auspices to be welcoming to LGBT Jews, Orthodox congregations do not offer ritual recognition of same-sex commitment.

DIVORCE

While Judaism celebrates and encourages marriage, nowhere within Jewish law is it stated that marriage is a lifelong union. Judaism recognises that marriages can fail and consequently provides specifically for divorce so that parties are free to remarry under Jewish auspices. A Jewish divorce (get, plural gittin) is a consensual document dissolving the marriage. The process is administered by a beth din. Traditionally the get may only be granted by the husband to the wife, who in turn accepts it. It is a formal document written on the instructions of the husband. After the giving and receiving of a get, both parties are free to marry again in a Jewish ceremony, although the wife has to wait 90 days before remarriage (excluding the day of receiving the get and the day of remarriage) or 24 months from the birth of any child.

(A) IMPORTANCE OF OBTAINING A GET

If a married Jewish woman who does not have a get has children by another Jewish man (even after a previous Jewish marriage has been dissolved civilly), those children will have the status of mamzer (plural mamzerim). Such children suffer considerable problems when it comes to their own marriage and are very limited in their choice of partner.

It is of the utmost importance that a Jewish woman, especially one of childbearing age going through divorce proceedings, should have both a civil divorce and a get. If a wife only has a civil divorce, but subsequently wishes to obtain a get, her husband may not then be willing to grant one or it may not be

possible to find him, or because of mental impairment he may lack the capacity voluntarily to grant a get. There is no remedy for any of these situations and therefore it is essential that a wife is advised of these pitfalls well before the civil divorce has been concluded.

(B) TIMING OF THE GET

This process can usually be initiated before the commencement of the civil proceedings. It is not necessary to wait until the husband and wife have stopped cohabiting and are no longer living at the same address. It cannot, however, be written and finalised until this happens.

The Divorce (Religious Marriages) Act 2002 added a new section 10(A) to the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973 in England and Wales, and the Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006 inserted a section, 3A, into the Divorce (Scotland) Act 1976, relating to religious divorce. These can help one spouse when the other spouse is not co-operating with obtaining a get. These statutes give the civil court discretion to delay or prevent the granting of a final decree of divorce until confirmation that the formalities for dissolving the religious marriage have been completed in England and Wales, and postpone the granting of the divorce in Scotland. The confirmation is required from the appropriate beth din of the applicant's choice.

In England and Wales, either spouse may make an application to the civil court to exercise this discretion after decree nisi but before decree absolute. In Scotland divorce is granted in a single process, so an application must be made before the decree of divorce has been granted.

In any event, in England and Wales, husbands and wives should consider cross undertakings to give and receive a get as part of the financial remedy order made by consent (in Scotland, the Minute of Agreement). Similarly, in Scotland, formal agreement should also be reached regarding the get before the decree of divorce is granted.

(C) PROCEDURE

One or both spouses are able to ask a beth din that proceedings should be commenced for a Jewish divorce.

The actual procedure for a get must be initiated by the husband. At the hearing, the husband instructs a trained scribe to write the get. The individually written document is given by the husband to the wife in the presence of two witnesses. The act of the wife accepting the document completes the divorce process. Arrangements can be made so that an agent can be appointed to give the document to the wife on behalf of the husband so that the couple need not meet. There are no references to responsibility for the breakdown of the marriage and no blame or fault apportioned to either party. For the procedure there is usually only one attendance at a beth din although some batei din also have a preliminary appointment.

The actual get document is retained by a beth din for safekeeping but a certificate of release (p'tur) is given to both parties as this needs to be produced if either party wishes to remarry under Jewish law.

COHABITATION

The modern fact of cohabitation without marriage is acknowledged although not encouraged in more socially conservative Jewish households and communities. In most observant Orthodox communities, couples do not cohabit before marriage.

If a Jewish couple has a civil marriage but not a religious marriage, and subsequently divorce, they may still require a get. Furthermore, a Jewish couple if they cohabit without any marriage ceremony may also require a get if they subsequently separate. If a woman cohabits with a Jewish man or has sexual intercourse with a Jewish man before a get is given to her, she will be regarded as an adulterer and may not marry that man according to Jewish law, even if a get is later obtained.

Serious problems, similar to those outlined in section (A) above, will affect the children of such a relationship conceived before a get is obtained, whether a civil divorce has been granted or not. An admission of adultery will mean that if the woman who has made such an admission wishes to marry the person with whom she has had the relationship, that marriage will not be possible.

DOMESTIC AND CHILD ABUSE

Sadly such matters do occur within the Jewish community. As in other communities they are often hidden and not spoken about within families, and so it is imperative that where there are any concerns whatsoever, they should be reported to social services and/or the police who have specific designated units with experienced personnel. Jewish community agencies, notably the Jewish Marriage Council, Jewish Women's Aid and Norwood, have trained counsellors who can also provide aid and assistance.

The President of the Family Division has issued a circular dealing with domestic abuse and containing a revised form, which came into force on 2nd October 2017. This may assist in relation to different kinds of abuse including the refusal of a get.

CONVERSION

While Judaism is not a proselytising religion, conversions are carried out by batei din. Each beth din has different arrangements and not all foreign or even Israeli conversions are necessarily accepted by the United Kingdom batei din. If a woman converts to Judaism after the birth of a child, the child must be converted in the child's own right. If a non-Jewish child is adopted, the child will need to be converted and – in the case of a boy – a circumcision will take place. Circumcision cannot take place until the adoption process is complete. Where a child has been converted, that conversion has to be confirmed by that child when reaching 12 (if a girl) or 13 (if a boy).

DEATH

Jewish law requires burial as soon as possible after death. There are special rules for the preparation of the body for burial carried out by the burial society (chevra kadisha). As little interference with the body as possible is a very important requirement, so a post mortem is actively discouraged unless absolutely necessary, although CT or MRI scans may be accepted. In some cases a non-invasive procedure may be a preferable alternative to a full post mortem. Cremation is only accepted by Reform and Liberal affiliations. If a body is cremated, some Orthodox cemeteries will not bury the ashes.

ORGAN DONATION

In principle, Judaism encourages organ donation in order to save lives. While, in Judaism, avoidance of interference with the dead body and rapid interment are prime concerns, each case is different. Orthodox Judaism holds that organs may not be removed from a donor until death has definitely occurred, but there are varying views about what constitutes 'death'. Some traditionally-observant Jews accept the 'brain stem death' criteria, and therefore the heart and lungs can be transplanted as well as other organs. Other Orthodox authorities will only agree to removal of organs from a 'non-beating heart' donor, which reduces the range of usable organs. Given the complex issues involved in organ donation for Jews, familial consent for organ donation is a key safeguard.

The Welsh Assembly has introduced an 'opt-out' system of organ donation. In 2017, both the government and opposition expressed an intention to extend such a presumed consent regime to England, as did the Scottish Government. The Jewish community has expressed considerable concern about protecting the role of family consent throughout the development of this legislation. In order to make it easier for Jews, and members of other faiths with similar beliefs, to donate their organs, a short statement has been drafted which commits to the principle of donation but clarifies that the potential donor and their family should be entitled to consult with their particular personal rabbinic authority. Anyone who feels strongly on these issues should make their wishes known.

The Board of Deputies prefers the continuation of an 'opt-in' process, with regular encouragement to agree to donate organs, to an 'opt-out' process. This is because the latter risks a person having their organs taken against their and their families' wishes, which could cause further anguish to families of the deceased at a time of considerable distress.

BEREAVEMENT AND MOURNING

When a Jew dies, the funeral should take place as soon as possible. Obtaining a death certificate is crucial to effect burial; sometimes difficulties may occur if a post mortem is required. Note that the law and procedure in England and Scotland are very different both with regard to registration and post mortems, and advice should be taken from the appropriate Jewish burial society for the location and religious denomination of the deceased.

Burial is often on the actual day of the death, although a day or two later is possible if family members have to come from abroad. This means that usually there is very little notice of a family funeral. Burial will be delayed if the death occurs on a festival day or the Sabbath, although funerals can take place on semi-festive days.

After the funeral, the immediate family of the deceased, comprising spouse, parents, children and siblings, may observe a seven day period of mourning, known as the shiva. During this time the mourners stay at home, saying prayers and receiving visitors and condolences. If the funeral takes place on a semi-festive day, the shiva will commence after the end of the festival and any immediately subsequent Sabbath. In addition, the duration of shiva may be curtailed if it would otherwise fall on a day when mourning is not permitted.

During the 30 days following a death, some men do not shave or cut their hair and, even if they do not normally do so, may attend synagogue or prayer groups daily – often three times a day, in the morning, afternoon and evening. There are additional restrictions and requirements that extend to certain mourners for up to a year from the death.

HELPFUL CONTACTS

The Board of Deputies of British Jews
www.bod.org.uk

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities
www.scojec.org

RELIGIOUS BODIES

Federation of Synagogues
www.federation.org.uk

Liberal Judaism
www.liberaljudaism.org

Masorti Judaism
www.masorti.org.uk

Reform Judaism
www.reformjudaism.org.uk

The S&P Sephardi Community
www.sephardi.org.uk

Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations
020 8802 6226

United Synagogue
www.theus.org.uk

COUNSELLING

Jewish Marriage Council
www.jmc-uk.org

CIRCUMCISION

Initiation Society of Great Britain
www.initiationsociety.net

Association of Reform and Liberal Mohelim
020 8349 2568

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Jewish Women's Aid
www.jwa.org.uk

SOCIAL SERVICES, ADOPTION AND FOSTERING

Jewish Care
www.jewishcare.org

Jewish Care Scotland
www.jcarescot.org.uk

Norwood
www.norwood.org.uk

USEFUL INFORMATION

“Getting your Get”

www.gettingyourget.co.uk

KOSHER FOOD

Really Jewish Food Guide

www.kosher.org.uk



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