

Civil Service Guide to Judaism

Guidance for all Civil Servants

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About the Civil Service Jewish Network

JNet is a cross-government network of Jewish civil servants and those interested in Jewish culture. Further information can be found [here](#). You can also [join the JNet mailing list here](#).

Key Points

- **The Jewish community encompasses a huge range of identities, traditions, and levels of religious observance, and Jewish civil servants will often follow Jewish practice in different ways to one another.**
- Jewish civil servants may require flexible working arrangements to accommodate for different elements of faith and traditional practice.
- Many will observe Shabbat (the Sabbath), from Friday evenings to Saturday evenings, where work and travel is prohibited.
- Many will also observe Jewish festivals and holy days where the same prohibitions apply, particularly the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which are usually around autumn time.
- Some Jewish civil servants will follow Jewish dietary law, known as keeping kosher, and may require adjustments at work events as necessary.
- Jewish bereavement ritual begins almost immediately after a loss, meaning a Jewish colleague may become unavailable at very short notice.
- Some orthodox Jews observe strict modesty laws and therefore may prefer to avoid physical contact, such as handshaking.
- The UK Government uses the [IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism](#), which serves as a guide to understanding and identifying antisemitism.

01 Introduction

This fact sheet is intended to serve as a general workplace guide to the main traditions and practices that Jewish civil servants may observe.

Jewish employees may observe all, some, or none of the practices outlined. **The Jewish community encompasses a huge range of identities, traditions, and**



levels of religious observance, and Jewish civil servants will often follow Jewish practice in different ways to one another. Civil servants should be aware that Jewish identity is not simply a matter of religious observance, it also covers culture, community, tradition, ethnicity and practice, and therefore patterns of observance do not necessarily mirror those of other religious groups.

Any request by a Jewish employee for flexible working should be dealt with sensitively and on a case by case basis - what is suitable for one individual may not be suitable for another.

If in doubt, ask the JNet co-chairs! Your interest will be appreciated, and we will be more than happy to explain how they can best be accommodated in line with business requirements.

This guide covers the Jewish Sabbath, Jewish festivals, dietary requirements, death and bereavements, and modesty.

For further information, please see the Board of Deputies of British Jews' [Employers Guide to Judaism](#).

02 Friday Afternoons & Shabbat (the Sabbath)

Shabbat (the Sabbath) is the Jewish day of rest. It runs from Friday evenings to Saturday evenings every week. Judaism works to a calendar where days run from sunset to nightfall. **This means that the time that Shabbat starts and finishes fluctuates throughout the year.** In the winter, Shabbat can start from as early as 3:30pm in London on a Friday, whilst in summer Shabbat can start as late as 9pm. Times will be slightly different for colleagues in other parts of the UK.

Jewish law requires Jews to refrain from various acts of 'work' on Shabbat. The prohibited acts of 'work' include travelling (other than by foot), cooking, writing, carrying, switching on and off electricity, using a telephone, and any transactions of a commercial nature including buying and selling. Those who strictly observe Shabbat will therefore not work on Shabbat in any circumstances and will in some cases not be contactable. In addition, they will need to prepare all meals for Friday night and Saturday in advance of Shabbat commencing.

Once Shabbat has begun, those that observe it strictly cannot work or travel, and so some Jewish staff will need to leave work early on Fridays to ensure they are home from work by the time Shabbat starts. Employee and line manager can discuss the best way to make up the time.

For those who are less religiously observant, Friday nights and Saturday mornings may still be an important part of Shabbat observance. It is traditional to have a family



or communal dinner and/or to attend synagogue on Friday nights or Saturday mornings. Some staff may prioritise certain aspects of Shabbat observance over others.

03 Festivals

There are several Jewish festivals scattered throughout the year. These are times for religious and cultural celebration and mark events from the Bible, Jewish history and the seasonal cycle. Rituals are performed and traditions observed primarily at home and partially at the synagogue.

Some of those have restrictions on working and travelling that are almost identical to Shabbat, including starting at sunset the previous day. **Those that strictly observe these festivals may need to leave work a little early or want to work from home to make the most of working hours before the festival starts.**

In particular, the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are observed by an overwhelming majority of Jews, and many Jewish civil servants will require leave for these days. Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, is the most serious Jewish festival and includes a 25 hour fast. Many staff may require leave for the afternoon before Yom Kippur to prepare for the start of Yom Kippur in the evening. In 2024 however, Yom Kippur starts on Sunday 24 September, so this will have less of an effect on working hours.

The following festivals have restrictions on working and travelling, which observant Jews may follow. Some Jews, particularly those part of Reform and Liberal communities, will observe fewer days of prohibited work than those from Orthodox communities. Jews that observe these festivals will require time off for them. **HR guidance will vary from department to department but in some departments there may be the possibility of taking religious days of observance as “special leave”, at a line manager’s discretion.**

Festival	Description	Date (<u>begins the night prior to the dates below</u>)
Rosh Hashanah	Commemorates the Jewish new year and is a time for reflection on personal conduct during the previous year and the year to come.	16-17 September 2023
Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)	Marks the day that Jews believe their fate for the coming year is decided by God. A day for confession and further self-reflection, following Rosh Hashanah.	25 September 2023



Succot	Commemorates and celebrates the protection that God gave the Israelites during the 40 years in the desert following the Exodus from Egypt.	30 September - 6 October 2023 (work only prohibited on 30 September and 1 October)
Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah	Celebrates the conclusion and restarting of the annual reading of the Torah (Old Testament).	7 - 8 October 2023
Pesach (Passover)	Celebrates the story of the biblical exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Includes special dietary rules.	23 - 30 April 2024 (work only prohibited 23-24 and 29-30 April)
Shavuot	Celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.	12-13 June 2024

Dates for festivals until 2027 can be found [here](#). **It is good practice to check these dates before organising important meetings or events to ensure Jewish colleagues are able to attend.**

This list is not exhaustive, and other festivals, including fast days, occur every year. Those observing fast days do not eat or drink until nightfall that day. Employees may ask to work from home to observe these days and will appreciate understanding from managers. Other celebratory festivals, including Hanukkah and Purim, do not include any restrictions on working, though some employees may wish to work from home on those days to accommodate evening celebrations.

04 Dietary Requirements

Judaism has several different dietary laws associated with it, known as keeping kosher. These rules include the prohibition on eating certain meat, fish and seafood, the separation of milk and meat in meals, and a requirement for kosher animals to be killed in a process defined in Jewish law.

Jews observe these laws in a wide variety of ways. Some Jews will simply not eat pork and shellfish, others will eat kosher meat at home but only eat vegetarian food produced in an unsupervised kitchen, whilst others will follow a diet that requires that all prepared food be produced in strictly regulated and supervised environments.

When planning events that involve food or even when, for example, eating lunch with or offering food to a Jewish colleague, you should be aware that some of your Jewish colleagues may not eat non-kosher food in any circumstances. **You should always check what a colleague's kosher dietary requirements are and make the necessary amendments to ensure the inclusion of Jewish colleagues.** In some cases this may mean providing a pescatarian, vegetarian or vegan option, but for others a meal or any products will need to be labelled as strictly kosher rather



than simply containing no prohibited ingredients and therefore will need to be ordered separately.

If planning a meeting at which refreshments are served, you might wish to consider providing uncut fruit which can be easily cleaned of bugs, such as apples, pears, citrus fruit and grapes. Plain tea and coffee served in disposable cups may also be served. Consider that some Jewish colleagues will not eat from shared crockery or cutlery, due to the risk that they may have come into contact with non-kosher food.

- [Hermolis](#) and [1070 Kitchen](#) offer a kosher meal-matching service for events, and many high street products and snacks are certified as kosher (you can check individual products at the [Kosher Nosh Guide](#) or www.isitkosher.uk).
- 1070 Kitchen based in Selfridges Food Hall in Oxford Street provides pre-packed cooked foods and sandwiches.
- Kosher sandwiches made by DD's (Hermolis Catering) are stocked in some supermarkets in London. The ones closest to Whitehall are Sainsbury's Strand (WC2N 5HY), Tesco Metro Covent Garden (WC2E 9EQ) and Sainsbury's Victoria Place (SW1W 9SJ). Further shops are listed on the [Hermolis website](#).
- The Houses of Parliament offers kosher food upon request, catered by 1070 Kitchen.

It is always advisable to talk it through with the person in question, who will appreciate being asked what they need.

05 Death and Bereavement

Jews have a very specific set of rules and rituals around death. Judaism requires that funerals take place as soon as possible after death, ideally within 24-48 hours of the death in question. The closest relatives of the deceased will then begin a week-long mourning period (known as 'sitting shiva') immediately afterwards. **This means that any Jewish colleagues who suffer a bereavement may need to stop work immediately, or at extremely short notice.**

During the shiva period, those that are direct relatives of the deceased stay at home, to be visited and comforted by friends and relatives. Special evening prayers also occur. Therefore, those that lose close relatives may not be able to come to work for a week after the burial. Government departments should have special leave arrangements which can accommodate this.

Some Jews will also observe restrictions associated with the mourning process over a longer period. There is a 30 day period and a year-long period where different



restrictions are observed. Restrictions can include not shaving, listening to music or going out socially.

06 Modesty

Some observant Jews observe a prohibition on physical contact between themselves and those who are neither related to them nor of the same gender. It would be considerate to allow these Jewish colleagues to initiate any contact such as shaking hands, should they wish to do so. If you are unsure, **it is advisable to talk it through sensitively with the person in question, who will appreciate being asked.**

07 Antisemitic Racism

In 2018 Government adopted the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism](#) as stated below:

“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”

The following examples may serve as illustrations:

Manifestations might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. However, criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic. Antisemitism frequently charges Jews with conspiring to harm humanity, and it is often used to blame Jews for “why things go wrong.” It is expressed in speech, writing, visual forms and action, and employs sinister stereotypes and negative character traits.

Contemporary examples of antisemitism in public life, the media, schools, the workplace, and in the religious sphere could, taking into account the overall context, include, but are not limited to:

- Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.
- Making mendacious, dehumanising, demonising, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective — such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.



- Accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews.
- Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g. gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during World War II (the Holocaust).
- Accusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust.
- Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.
- Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour.
- Applying double standards by requiring of it a behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.
- Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis.
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.
- Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.

Antisemitic acts are criminal when they are so defined by law (for example, denial of the Holocaust or distribution of antisemitic materials in some countries).

Criminal acts are antisemitic when the targets of attacks, whether they are people or property – such as buildings, schools, places of worship and cemeteries – are selected because they are, or are perceived to be, Jewish or linked to Jews.

Antisemitic discrimination is the denial to Jews of opportunities or services available to others and is illegal in many countries.

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