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Laws of Yom Tov

Yom Tov is similar to Shabbat, but different. We can carry and cook (somewhat) but can not perform other forms of labor. Looking to make sense of it all? This highly-readable essay will walk you through the laws of Yom Tov.

By Chabad.org Staff



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Shavuot With **Chabad.ORG**

Laws of Yom Tov

Rejoicing, enjoying, resting from work

Just as there are sacred places, portals in space through which a certain transcendence shines, so too there are sacred times, luminescent points in the yearly cycle, times when we are lifted beyond time, far above the mundane world and all its cares.

Shabbat is the day on which the weekly cycle transcends itself. Then there is Yom Tov, literally, “a good day,” each Yom Tov the highest point in the year in its particular way, with its particular meaning, message and flavor.

On these days, the Torah prohibits work. At a sacred time, work or any involvement in the mundanities of the week will subvert that sacredness and block its light. But “work” is defined somewhat differently for Yom Tov than it is for Shabbat, as we will see.

How to Celebrate Yom Tov

There is another difference between Shabbat and Yom Tov. On Shabbat, we are required to honor the day and enjoy it. On Yom Tov, besides honor and enjoyment, we also celebrate with joy, as the Torah says, “And you shall rejoice in your festival . . . and you shall only be happy.”¹

Altogether, there are six days of the year called Yom Tov:

1. The first day of **Passover**—plus the second day in the Diaspora.
2. The seventh day of **Passover**—plus the eighth day in the Diaspora.
3. **Shavuot**, which is one day in Israel, two days in the Diaspora.
4. **Rosh Hashanah**, which is two days in both Israel and the Diaspora.
5. The first day of **Sukkot**—plus the second day in the Diaspora.
6. **Shemini Atzeret** and **Simchat Torah**. In Israel, these two holidays are one and the same. In the Diaspora, they are two consecutive days. They follow the seven days of Sukkot.

You might be asking, “What about Yom Kippur?” That’s a category all on its own. It’s a special day like Yom Tov, but we can’t honor it with food and drink, so we honor it with fine clothes and the lighting of candles before it begins. As far as work goes, it’s just like Shabbat.

You can see our Holidays section for more information on these holidays. This article is about the common requirements of every Yom Tov.

If you read *Why are holidays celebrated an extra day in the Diaspora?* you’ll discover that keeping the second day of Yom Tov in the Diaspora is not a biblical institution. But for that very reason, it was decided that we must be just as strict on all matters on the second days as on the first.² There’s an interesting psychology behind that decision: it was felt that if people treated the second day Yom Tov with less regard, eventually they would ignore it altogether.

What if you live outside of Israel, but will be visiting Israel for the holiday, or vice versa; how many days do you keep? This gets complicated, and depends on a variety of factors. Best to talk it over with your local Orthodox rabbi.

Now let’s get to the big question: What exactly is honor, enjoyment and celebration? To different people, all those can mean different things. So that we can celebrate as a community, our sages set certain guidelines:

Honor

Honoring Yom Tov includes getting a haircut before it starts, so that you’ll look your best. It also includes taking a hot shower or bath, washing your hair and cutting your nails—just as you do before Shabbat. And just as on Shabbat, it’s a mitzvah to bake *challah* at home the day before Yom Tov.³

Honoring Yom Tov also means refraining from sitting down to a meal in the late afternoon. You want to have an appetite when the Yom Tov begins, so that you can honor the day with a proper feast. Late afternoon means the last quarter of the day, about three hours before sunset.**4**

Enjoyment

Also known as pleasure. You need to enjoy two meals on every day of Yom Tov—one at night, and another during the daytime. On Shabbat there's a third meal, but that doesn't apply on Yom Tov.**5**

A meal, in the Jewish lexicon, means bread—from wheat, spelt, rye, oats or barley. The sages knew that a person is not satiated by anything less than an amount of bread the volume of an egg—which is about 2 oz. with most bread. On Yom Tov, you need to eat at least a little more than that, to make sure this is a feast and not a snack.**6**

We make *kiddush* on wine, just as we do on Shabbat. But men should drink additional wine during the course of each meal.**7** Women may do so too, but are not obligated. Why the difference? We'll get to that in the section on "Celebration." In any case, make each meal a special meal with meat, wine and delicacies as you can afford.**8**

In general, the sages advised to spend liberally and not to be stingy when it comes to Yom Tov. They guaranteed a full refund on all such expenses, saying that a person's income is fixed every year on Rosh Hashanah, excluding whatever you spend on Shabbat and Yom Tov. With those, if you spend less, you get less, and if you spend more, you get more.**9**

Celebration

We celebrate not only on Yom Tov, but also on the days sandwiched between. Passover has seven days altogether—eight in the Diaspora—and begins and ends with a Yom Tov. Sukkot has seven days, beginning with Yom Tov and followed by another Yom Tov called Shemini Atzeret. The days in between are called Chol Hamoed, roughly meaning "weekdays of the festival." On these days, work is not prohibited in the same way as Yom Tov, as explained in our Chol Hamoed article. But they are still days for celebration and happiness.

Happiness includes giving out sweets to children. It includes new clothes and jewelry for the ladies—of course, all in accordance with your means. In times when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, men celebrated by eating the meat that they had offered up on the altar. Today, when we currently have no Temple, men fulfill their requirement with wine, as the psalm says, "wine brings joy to a man's heart."**10** But you're still doing a mitzvah by eating meat on Yom Tov: since we can't celebrate with the meat of

the altar, we take the next best thing by celebrating with regular kosher meat.¹¹ (If you do not enjoy meat, see Do I Have to Eat Meat on Shabbat?)

Rosh Hashanah is somewhat different from every other Yom Tov, since it's principally a day of judgment and a day of awe. Nevertheless, we enjoy a fine meal both at night and in the day, celebrating with confidence that Gd will grant us a sweet and bountiful new year.¹² The rejoicing, however, is meant to be somewhat contained, and we try not to fill ourselves at the meal, so as to preserve the serious atmosphere of the day.¹³

In general, celebrating Yom Tov means taking the meal beyond the standard for Shabbat, with whatever special foods we most enjoy—and more of them. It also means dressing even better than we do for Shabbat.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the day is not meant to be spent doing nothing but feasting and drinking. Yes, the Torah says that it's a holiday for us, but it also calls it a special day for Gd. So we need to split that fifty-fifty. The first half of the day is for Torah study, meditation and prayer. Then, in the afternoon, we have time for our feast, and perhaps a nap and a stroll. Then, back to the synagogue for the afternoon and evening prayers.¹⁵

At the time that you're eating and drinking, keep this in mind: Celebrating Yom Tov is a mitzvah. It's a divine act to eat, drink and be happy. That being so, it makes sense that there's a certain dignity to that happiness. It's not a stuff-yourself-and-have-another-drink kind of happiness. It's the joy of sharing time with family and guests in a meaningful way. That happens only if you prepare in advance. Have a few Jewish stories to tell, appropriate for both children and guests. Prepare something on a Torah topic that will spark discussion. Avoid talking about people, keep far from depressing topics, and focus on keeping the spirit uplifting and inspiring.

There's another caveat. As Maimonides writes:

When he eats and drinks [on Yom Tov], he is obligated to feed the foreigner, orphan and widow, together with other indigent paupers . . . One who locks the doors of his courtyard, however, and eats and drinks together with his children and wife, and does not feed and give drink to the poor and embittered—this is not the joy of a mitzvah, but the joy of his stomach . . .¹⁶

What's Okay and What's Not on Yom Tov

The Short Version:

If it's off-limits on Shabbat, it's most likely off-limits on Yom Tov. That includes switching on or off electrical appliances, driving a car, going to work, handling money and writing. The major differences between the two are cooking and baking, lighting a fire from a pre-existing flame, and carrying in the public domain. All these are permitted on Yom Tov—albeit with certain restrictions that will be outlined below.

The Long Version:

On Yom Tov, as on Shabbat, it's a mitzvah to refrain from work. That means that just by not doing something, you're fulfilling a mitzvah and sanctifying the day. On the other hand, doing work is not just opting out of the mitzvah; it's a transgression that subverts and profanes that sanctity.

But there's a difference between work on Yom Tov and work on Shabbat. Here's how the Torah puts it:

No work shall be done, but what is eaten by any person, that alone may be done for you. (Exodus 12:16)

What is “Work for Food?”

How do we define work that is for the sake of “what is eaten by any person?” Imagine if each individual decided for him- or herself. One person could decide he needs to go shopping to buy food. Another will decide she needs to go to work to earn money to buy food. Another will decide he can't eat his food without the TV blasting. Very quickly, the entire communal atmosphere of Yom Tov would disappear.

Fortunately, we have a traditional reading of this phrase, as recorded in the Mishnah and the Talmud. This reading delineates the boundaries of “work for food” quite simply: the work must be done with the actual item to be consumed, so that when a person benefits from this item on Yom Tov, he is benefiting directly from that work.¹⁷

So, for example, extinguishing a fire, building a structure, or plowing a field are not permitted, since whatever benefit you receive from those is indirect. The problem with shopping is that you are handling money—and money is not food. Going to work and pushing papers is also not directly working with the food. And, despite what some may think, the TV is not an eating utensil.

But things like cooking, kneading dough or bringing food from one domain to another are permissible, since you're working directly with the consumable item.**18**

What about burning fuel in order to cook? Since the fire itself is cooking the food, that's considered a direct benefit, and therefore is permissible.**19**

The rabbis forbade starting a fire, since it is creating something new—which is pretty much the defining quality of “work” as it applies to Shabbat and Yom Tov. Even if it's necessary, since it's something that could have been done before Yom Tov (we'll discuss that later), it remains forbidden. So, we always light from a pre-existing flame.**20**

From Food to Everything Else

Now, this reading comes with another vital piece of tradition: once a form of work is permitted for eating or drinking, it is permitted for any other beneficial purpose on that day. You don't need to actually eat or drink the product—the work could be needed for some other form of enjoyment other than eating, or some Yom Tov mitzvah, or another mitzvah that could be done only that day. For those who know some Hebrew, there is a phrase for this mechanism: הותרה, הותרה. **21**

For example, since you can carry food from one domain to another, you can also carry your child, so that you can enjoy the day with your child.

Since you can add fuel to a fire to cook food, you can add fuel to a fire to keep your house warm.

Since you can heat water for drinking or cooking, you can heat water to wash dishes.

But don't stop reading here. There are a few conditions to this permit. Among them**22**:

1. The activity must fulfill some beneficial purpose for that day—not for tomorrow (which begins that night). Even if tomorrow is also Yom Tov, that doesn't help.
2. The activity must fulfill some purpose that Jews in general would consider beneficial. If it's something that only a minority would find beneficial, the work remains forbidden.
3. And as we already explained concerning food, the activity must provide you direct benefit.

Do It Before Yom Tov

The sages who clarified the laws of the Torah for us knew the self-defeating nature of the human psyche all too well. They understood that if food preparations are permitted on Yom Tov, people will

busy themselves with other things until then, and end up spending the entire Yom Tov harvesting, threshing, grinding, etc., to prepare food, leaving no time to enjoy the day.

With this in mind, they added two more restrictions:

1. Anything that could be done before Yom Tov, without any loss to the quality of the food, cannot be done on Yom Tov itself.

For example, if your soup is just as good if it was made a day or two earlier, kept in the fridge and reheated on Yom Tov, then you should not be making it on Yom Tov.

If you forgot to do this work beforehand, and you need it for Yom Tov, you need to do it in a different way than you would do it during the week, so that you'll remember that it should have been done beforehand.

The exception to this rule is bringing something from one domain to another. Even if it could have been done before Yom Tov, such carrying is permitted. The rabbis understood that to forbid this would be tying our hands on Yom Tov, making it very difficult to enjoy. So, for example, even if you could have brought a bottle of wine over to your host's home before Yom Tov, it's permissible to bring it there on Yom Tov itself.

Note that carrying an umbrella is still not allowed. The reason is that some consider opening an umbrella to be similar to making a tent—which is one of the forms of work prohibited on Shabbat and Yom Tov.

2. They prohibited certain forms of work that are generally done in large quantities.

Unless you're living on a farm or make your own flour, the two that will concern you are harvesting—since that includes picking fruits off a tree, or vegetables from your garden—and juicing fruits.

Similarly, they prohibited certain kinds of work that people generally do to provide for days ahead, namely trapping and milking.

Each type of work has other forms that are prohibited as an extension of it. This is all explained in the laws of Shabbat.

These forms of work are all off-limits, even if you forgot to do them before Yom Tov. In this case, doing them in a different way than you would during the week doesn't help.

Practically Speaking

The best way to learn to keep Yom Tov is to spend it with a family that knows what it's doing and does it right. But here are some of the most common situations and halachot:

Electric Appliances

Creating an electric circuit is prohibited, just as on Shabbat, so we do not turn on or off light switches or electric appliances.

Driving

Driving a motor vehicle entails continuously creating new sparks—which are essentially new fires. As we learned earlier, creating a fire is forbidden on Yom Tov.

Lighting Candles

Since you mustn't strike a match on Yom Tov, you're going to need a pre-existing flame from which to light the Yom Tov candles on the second night. A gas stove or a 24-hour candle will do the job. If you forgot to prepare, perhaps you can find a neighbor who has a flame burning. Even if your neighbor is Jewish and lit the flame on Yom Tov, you are allowed to transfer fire from it and use it. Extinguishing a fire is not permitted on Yom Tov, so after you've lit the candles, let the match burn out on its own.

Carrying

As mentioned above, carrying from one domain to another, or through a public domain, is permitted for the sake of the Yom Tov. That means that when taking something out of your house, you need to think, "Do I need this for some acceptable purpose today?"

So, if the baby stroller has unnecessary items in its pockets, those have to be removed. Check your pockets, as well, for items you do not need that day.

Let's say you're leaving the house and not planning to come back until the nighttime. Can you carry the house key with you? Some rabbis say no, since you don't need it that day.²⁷ Others say that carrying the key is a necessity for that day, since otherwise you would not be able to leave the house locked.²⁸

Preparing for Tomorrow

As we explained, any form of work that's permitted is permitted only if you're going to benefit from it that day. Even if you will need it that night, and that night is Yom Tov, you cannot do it today.

That applies to cooking, peeling vegetables or fruits, bringing something from one domain to another, or washing dishes. Even setting the table is not allowed, unless you plan to eat there that day. (If it's a mess, and you are using that room, you can tidy it up, since that's deemed beneficial for your enjoyment of the day.) On Yom Tov, today is for today, and tomorrow is tomorrow.

If the day after Yom Tov is Shabbat, then you must read our article on Eruv Tavshilin.

There are two exceptions to this rule:

1. If you've got a big pot of food ready to cook, or a kettle full of water to boil, you can put it all on the stove at once—even though it contains more than you need for today, and even though you're planning to eat the rest tomorrow, as long as you actually serve at least some of it that day. What's not permitted is to say out loud that you're doing this to have food for tomorrow.
2. Certain foods taste better when cooked in large amounts, such as meat and poultry. In these cases, you can cook more than you need today, since whatever is there benefits today's food. Again, make sure to serve at least some of it that day. And don't say aloud that you're cooking this food for tomorrow.

Dealing with Fire

You can make a fire larger, if needed, on Yom Tov. For example, you can add wood to a fire that's heating your home, or turn up a gas stove to cook food.

You cannot, however, extinguish a fire, or even diminish it, by removing fuel.

Stovetops

In years gone by, gas stoves were lit from a pilot flame that was burning continuously. That made it permissible to turn on any of the elements, since it was being lit from a pre-existing flame. This is not the case with today's stoves that rely on an electrically generated spark to ignite the flame. If you can turn on the gas on an element without that electric igniter clicking, then you could do so on Yom Tov and light the stove from a previously existing flame, such as a candle. Otherwise, you'll have to leave it burning from before Yom Tov.

Once the flame is burning, you can turn it up to cook your food. What if you want to lower the flame on a gas stove to prevent the food from burning, or to allow it to cook properly? This is a matter of debate among halachic authorities. Most allow it, while others say that you should remove the food from the flame and place the food upon another burner. According to all opinions, you cannot turn the fire off on a gas stove.

What about an electric stove? A glowing electric element is treated as a fire, but with an added complication: a thermostat switches the electric current on and off to moderate the temperature of the coil. Although there's an indicator light for most stovetops, that's only telling you that the element is active—but there's no indication of when the current is live and when it's temporarily ceased.

That being so, once the element is glowing, and if there are no indicators on your stovetop panel that change when you adjust the temperature, most authorities permit turning it up if the cooking so demands. If the element is not glowing, don't play with it—turning it higher so that it glows would be considered creating a fire. But once you've got that element bright and hot, turning the temperature down will most likely immediately switch off the electric current temporarily—and so, a no-go.

A neat solution to this problem is to have an electrician attach a set of indicator lights to your stovetop, to indicate when the current is on and when it is off for each element. (Note that this may void your warranty.) If the current is on, and the element is already glowing hot, you can turn the element up. If it's off, you can turn the element down, but not off.

Induction cooktops are a whole other issue. These use electricity to create a magnetic field that will heat ferrous metal. You actually turn these on by placing a pot on them, and turn them off by removing one. Unfortunately, that means we can't use them on Shabbat or Yom Tov.

Ovens

Unlike on Shabbat, causing a fire on Yom Tov is a rabbinical and not a biblical prohibition. Therefore, it's prohibited only if we cause the fire directly. When you open the door of an oven and let in cold air, thereby triggering a thermostat to (possibly) get an element glowing, that's an indirect cause (called *grama*), and therefore permissible.

On the other hand, if when you open the door of the oven a light goes on, then you've got a real problem—even on Yom Tov. The same applies if the oven element is set to turn off whenever the door is opened—as is the case with many ovens.

In the case of the light bulb, you can simply remember to unscrew that bulb before Yom Tov. The oven element will take a little more ingenuity. If you want to open the door of your oven on Yom Tov, make sure to buy one that does not have this issue. Or buy an oven with Sabbath Mode.

Many of the standard kitchen ovens today come with Sabbath Mode.

On different ovens, this can mean somewhat different things. But one common feature of Sabbath Mode is the ability to switch off that auto-off feature of the oven's element when the oven door is opened.

There are other features of Sabbath Mode. Most modern ovens are set to automatically turn off after twelve hours of continuous use. While this is generally a good idea, when you're trying to keep your food hot for a 48-hour Yom Tov, it can be a real pain. In a Sabbath Mode oven, that feature can be temporary disabled.

There's a controversial feature of Sabbath Mode designed to allow you to raise and lower the temperature in your oven over Yom Tov. Here's how it works: Once in Sabbath Mode, nothing happens immediately upon pressing the buttons. Nothing changes in the display, and no other new electric circuits are made. At random intervals, the oven's computer will look at whatever buttons might have been pressed and adjust the oven's temperature accordingly. This renders any changes to be *grama*—indirect. Some halachic authorities are of the opinion that indirectly lowering the temperature of your oven is permissible on Yom Tov.

But a large number of major halachic authorities disagree. Furthermore, not all Sabbath Mode ovens are created equal, and may not comply the specifications of even those authorities who permit that feature. If you want to use this feature, best to discuss it with your local Orthodox rabbi, citing the brand and features of your Sabbath Mode oven. Even better if that rabbi is also an engineer.

Note that if you set your oven to timed bake, once it's off—even if it's programmed to turn on again later—it can no longer be used over that Yom Tov.

Hot Water

When you turn on the hot water tap, cold water enters a heating tank somewhere in your house or building, which effectively means that you are cooking water. On Shabbat, that's not allowed. On Yom Tov, however, it is permissible use the hot water tap to wash dishes, hands, or any other part of the body. Nevertheless, bathing or showering the entire body in hot water remains off-limits. You can use the hot water, however, to bathe your baby on Yom Tov.

Squeezing Fruits

As mentioned above, squeezing fruits to extract their juice is prohibited on Yom Tov just as it is on Shabbat (see Food Preparation on Shabbat).

Muktzeh

Objects that may not be handled on Shabbat are called *muktzeh*. For example: pens, wallets, candlesticks and matches. The rules of *muktzeh* apply to Yom Tov as well—only that many objects serve a function that’s off-limits on Shabbat but is perfectly okay on Yom Tov. So, for example, you can move your candlesticks from place to place on Yom Tov, even though you are not allowed to do so on Shabbat.

Getting Used to It All

Just as a musician or an artist studies and practices to create beautiful music and art, so a Jew studies the laws of Yom Tov to create a beautiful day. At first, mistakes are inevitable. Eventually, they become second nature. But, as with the musician, study never ends.

What we’ve presented here is only a bare-bones introduction to a lifelong study. Keep learning, keep growing, and your Yom Tov experience will keep growing with you.

Footnotes

1. Deuteronomy 16:14–15.

2. There are two exceptions to this rule. Both apply to all second days of Yom Tov excluding the second day of Rosh Hashanah: a) It is permitted to take any and all medicines, even for minor discomfort. b) It is permitted to hold funerals. Today, however, in most communities it is customary to not hold funerals on the second day of Yom Tov.

3. Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 529:2.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid. 529:3.

6. Ibid. 529:4.

7. This applies only if you can afford to do so.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Psalms 104:15.

11. Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 529:7.

12. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 581; Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 597:1.

13. Shulchan Aruch Harav, *ibid.*

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid. 529:10.

16. Mishneh Torah, Hil. Shevitat Yom Tov 6:16.

17. See Mishneh Torah, *ibid.* 1:4–5, and Maggid Mishneh commentary there; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 495:1; Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 495:2.

18. Ibid.

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- 19.** Magen Avraham on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, beginning of sec. 518; Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 495:2.
- 20.** Talmud, Beitzah 33b; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 502:1.
- 21.** Talmud, Beitzah 12a; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 518:1; Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 495:3.
- 22.** See Shulchan Aruch Harav, *ibid.*
- 23.** Mishneh Torah, Hil. Shevitat Yom Tov 1:5.
- 24.** Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 495:5–6.
- 25.** *Ibid.* 495:8.
- 26.** *Ibid.* 495:9.
- 27.** Mevakshei Torah, Yom Tov, p. 267.
- 28.** Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Minchas Shlomo 2:35–39.
- 29.** Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 503:4.
- 30.** *Ibid.* 503:5.
- 31.** Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 502:1–3.
- 32.** Talmud, Beitzah 22a.