

How do festivals, like Passover, shape Jewish faith?

Lauren: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm Lauren Layfield. I'm a TV and radio presenter, and your host for this series all about Judaism.

In this episode, we're talking about why festivals in Judaism matter. But I'm not doing it by myself. I'm joined by my brilliant co-host, Rabbi Anna Wolfson.

Anna: Hi Lauren! Yes, this is the series where we dive into the beliefs and practices that you may come across in your GCSE. As you say Lauren, I am a rabbi, which means I studied to become ordained and now I lead services and teach people in my community about Judaism.

Lauren: Well, look I've got my pen and paper ready. A notes app will do for you as well. Jot down any of the key information that we discuss. And there will be a quiz at the end as well won't there?

Anna: Absolutely!

Lauren: Cannot wait for it. And remember, there are more episodes on Judaism, just search for 'GCSE Judaism' on BBC Sounds and listen to the topic you need help with. Shall we get into it?

Anna: Let's do it!

Lauren: Anna, I would love to hear about some of the festivals you celebrate in Judaism, and what they mean to you.

Anna: Definitely, festivals are a really important part of my faith. Let's start with Passover, or 'Pesach'. It's an annual holiday which we celebrate in the spring, in the Jewish month of Nisan.

Lauren: So, what's the significance of Passover, or 'Pesach'?

Anna: So, Passover remembers the Exodus, when God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites were the ancestors of the Jewish people. Passover celebrates freedom and reminds Jews of God's power and faithfulness. The Hebrew word 'Pesach' actually means 'passed over'. It's believed that God sent ten plagues to persuade the Egyptian Pharaoh, or King, to let the Israelites go.

In the final plague, God told the Israelites to mark their doorposts with lamb's blood to prevent their firstborn children from being killed. That sign meant that God would pass over their homes and spare their children.

Lauren: Okay so that's where the name 'Passover' comes from?

Anna: Exactly.

Lauren: How is Passover celebrated today?

Anna: So today, it's a communal celebration that mainly takes place in the home. It lasts for seven or eight days. In Israel, Passover is seven days for everyone. Outside Israel, Reform Jews observe seven days following the biblical commandment, while Orthodox Jews observe eight days, maintaining the traditional practice from when the calendar date was more uncertain.

Lauren: And what are some of the traditions of Passover?

Anna: So many of the festival's traditions represent parts of the Exodus story. Food for example plays a huge role in Passover.

Lauren: Go on then, tell us more.

Anna: Well, the 'Seder' is a meal usually held at home, although some synagogues hold a communal Seder. It often takes place during the first two evenings of the festival. During the Seder, the Exodus story is retold from a book called the Haggadah. While this is read, specific food and drink are consumed that symbolise elements in the story.

Lauren: Can you give us some examples?

Anna: Of course! Over the course of the Seder, four cups of wine are drunk at specific times. In Jewish tradition, wine represents joy and celebration, so drinking wine during the Seder celebrates the joy of freedom from slavery. The four cups remind Jews of God's promises to redeem them from Egypt.

Lauren: So, it's about celebrating freedom?

Anna: That's exactly right. Passover is a joyful celebration of God freeing the Jewish people. Another food we eat during Passover is matzah which is unleavened bread, meaning the bread has no yeast, so it doesn't rise. It's a bit like a flat cracker. It is not the tastiest of food but there is nostalgia in eating it.

Lauren: What does matzah represent?

Anna: Well, when the Israelites were fleeing Egypt, they were in such a rush to leave that the bread they made didn't have enough time to rise. That's why we don't eat leavened, or risen, bread during Passover.

Lauren: It sounds like these rituals are important for remembering, and I can see why remembering is really important in Passover.

Anna: You're right Lauren. And the word 'remember' is really key there as that's exactly what God instructed the Israelites to do. In the book of Exodus chapter 12 verse 14, after promising the 10th plague, God said "This day shall be for you a remembrance day."

Lauren: So that quote shows Passover is a time to remember that Exodus story.

Anna: That's it.

Lauren: Can you tell us about another festival in the Jewish calendar?

Anna: Yes, let's have a look at Rosh Hashanah, which means 'head of the year'.

Lauren: 'Head of the year' - so is that like a New Year's celebration?

Anna: It is! It's a holiday to celebrate the end of one year and the start of a Jewish new year. It takes place usually over two days, around September or October, and for Jews, it is a time of rejoicing but also of rest and reflection.

Lauren: And what are Jewish people reflecting on during Rosh Hashanah?

Anna: Some may reflect on themselves over the past year, on things like their good deeds or their wrongdoings. They'll also give a lot of thought to their personal relationship with God and their faith. A core belief in Judaism is that God is the Supreme Judge, and Rosh Hashanah is often called the 'Day of Judgement', so it's really important that we use the time for reflection and consider whether we are living in a way that pleases God.

Lauren: That makes a lot of sense, thanks for explaining that. And there's more information on festivals like Rosh Hashanah over on the Bitesize website. Just search for 'Bitesize GCSE Judaism Festivals' for more detail. So Anna, what does Rosh Hashanah mean to you?

Anna: Well, the actions and reflection during Rosh Hashanah have a big impact on the rest of my year. It is a chance to reflect and reset for the year ahead. Largely all denominations celebrate Rosh Hashanah in the same way. It is a busy time in synagogue and lots of community members come, even bringing family who are visiting from further away.

After the services, I will join family, friends or community members for a celebratory lunch. After lunch we will go to a body of water and do the ritual of Tashlich, which we'll talk more about shortly.

Lauren: Are there any other customs during Rosh Hashanah celebrations?

Anna: There are. Something that is strongly associated with the holiday is a Shofar which is a trumpet sounding instrument made from a horn, usually from a ram or another animal.

Lauren: What is the significance of that?

Anna: Well, it is sounded everyday over the last month of the year, except on Shabbat because that's the weekly day of rest. During the Rosh Hashanah celebration, it's blown in the synagogue. It symbolises a call for Jews to wake up spiritually in preparation for the Jewish new year. It is also a call for repentance and asking for forgiveness.

Rosh Hashannah starts what is known as the 10 days of repentance where we are instructed to right any wrongs in the lead up to Yom Kippur, which we will be discussing later on in this episode. It is the time to rebuild relationships that may have broken down, apologise to anyone we may have hurt and consider how we want to do better in the next year.

Lauren: So, does the synagogue play a big role in Rosh Hashanah?

Anna: It does. During the holiday many Jews spend a lot of time in synagogue for services and prayers and also reading from the Jewish scripture - the Torah. But the synagogue isn't the only place. The ceremony known as Tashlich takes place by water.

Lauren: And tell us what is the Tashlich?

Anna: It's a ceremony that typically takes place on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. It involves heading to a body of water, such as the sea, a river, or even a pond. Biblical passages are read that express repentance and forgiveness. Jews then symbolically cast off their sins into the water. I love the ritual of Tashlich. I go together with my community to the nearest body of water.

We usually take bird seed for the ducks. And after some readings and prayers, each person will take some seed and go by themselves to the water side. And every handful of seed we throw into the water represents something we would like to cast away from the year gone by. It is a chance to symbolically let go and start afresh for the New Year ahead.

Lauren: That sounds amazing, and just very unique as well to your religion.

Anna: It's really special. Can I tell you about one more Jewish festival Lauren?

Lauren: Absolutely.

Anna: Yom Kippur is often considered the most holy and sacred day of the year for Jewish people. Yom Kippur falls just 10 days after Rosh Hashanah and is commonly known as the 'Day of Atonement'.

Lauren: And what do Jewish people do, or not do, during Yom Kippur?

Anna: On Yom Kippur, there are specifically 5 things that must be avoided over the 25-hour period. These are; eating, drinking, washing and bathing, applying oils or creams to the body, wearing leather shoes, and any sexual relations.

Lauren: I mean I imagine no eating and drinking can be quite a test.

Anna: Yes, it can be hard, but it really helps to focus on God. During the 25-hour period of fasting, Jews will spend the time asking God to forgive the things they've done wrong. It is also common for some to wear white, symbolising purity, as they spend much of the day in synagogue praying.

Lauren: And that's why it's known as Day of Atonement then?

Anna: That's it. Many believe that God's final judgement will be decided on Yom Kippur. Every year on this holy day, we are given the opportunity to clear the slate and

start again. There is a recognition that human beings are just that, we're human and we will make mistakes.

So, each year we are able to do the work to apologise for those lapses and commit to doing better for the year ahead. All of these festivals are important in bringing communities together, deepening connection with God, taking time for reflection and reminding Jews of their history. OK Lauren, are you ready for a quiz?

Lauren: I am indeed! You ask the questions, and I'll jot down my answers. And I'd recommend grabbing a pen and paper, or you can use your notes app.

Anna: And you can always pause the episode if you need more time to think of your answers. OK, first question. How did Passover get its name?

Lauren: OK so it's to do with the last of the ten plagues, where God 'passed over' and protected the Jewish households.

Anna: You've got it. Passover serves to remind Jews that God protected them and continues to. Okay next question. What is the name of the horn which is blown during the month before and during Rosh Hashanah?

Lauren: That would be the Shofar.

Anna: Correct! And finally, how long do Jews fast for during Yom Kippur?

Lauren: That is 25 hours.

Anna: Perfect, three out of three! Yes, Jews will spend that time praying and asking for forgiveness.

Lauren: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. And thank you to Rabbi Anna for telling us about your special Jewish festivals.

Anna: My pleasure! Next time, we'll look at the role of the synagogue in Jewish life.

Lauren: Amazing. And if you've found this helpful, please make sure to check out more episodes in this series, as well as series on other faiths you may be studying at GCSE, including Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam. Just search for 'GCSE Religious Studies' on BBC Sounds.

Anna: See you next time!