

Sharing Shabbat in the Classroom: A Resource for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers



Overview

Discover exciting and engaging ways to share food and candlelighting traditions of Shabbat in the classroom. This guide is part of a series of resources for parents, caregivers, and teachers for sharing Jewish traditions, holidays, and culture with K–5 students.

This guide focuses on cultural celebrations of Shabbat. Below, you will find: pre-visit instructions, classroom prep, parent introduction, supply list, an explanation of Shabbat, a guided art project, Shabbat read-aloud (for grades K–2), music, snack, and closing.

Judaism and Light

Use the information below to familiarize yourself with language on Jewish traditions, customs, and rituals around light. This material is drawn from the exhibition *Radiant Practices: Illuminating Jewish Traditions*, on view at The Contemporary Jewish Museum (The CJM) from December 7, 2023–April 28, 2024.

Light holds powerful spiritual significance in Judaism. In Jewish ritual, light, typically in the form of candles, is used to mark sacred moments in time. Light was the first thing created in the Jewish creation story, before the sun, the moon, and the stars. This resource presents examples of Shabbat candlesticks—ritual objects that illustrate the foundational meaning of light in Jewish traditions. Other Jewish ritual objects connecting to light include the menorah, used on Hannukah; the Havdalah candle that is lit as part of a ritual marking the transition from Shabbat to the rest of the week; and the yartzheit memorial candle lit on the anniversary of the death of a loved one.

There are meaningful connections between light and ritual objects in many cultural practices, from the Kinara candelabra lit during Kwanzaa to the *diyas* (clay pots) during the Hindu festival Diwali to the Paschal candle used on Easter in Christianity. Taken in this broader context, these Jewish ritual objects contribute to an ancient fascination with light across cultures and religions and provide an entry point for cross-cultural conversations.

Being Jewish

People express their Jewish identity in a multitude of ways. Some people think of their Jewish identity strictly as an expression of heritage; some may hold certain Jewish values central in their lives; some may eat Jewish foods or celebrate Jewish holidays; and some identify religiously as Jewish and follow rules and teachings found in a book called the Torah. All of these are part of the diverse experiences of being Jewish today.

Jewish people have diverse origins and communities in various parts of the world. These communities have flourished over centuries, integrating local customs into their way of life. This diversity is expressed through distinct practices in cuisine, language, music, and more. Additionally, Jewish people are racially diverse and may identify with various ethnic backgrounds, including Black, Asian, Middle Eastern, Latino, and others.

Being Jewish Continued

Shabbat, also known as the Sabbath, is the Jewish day of rest, celebrated every week from sunset on Friday to the onset of darkness on Saturday evening. Many observe the Sabbath by lighting candles and coming together for a Friday night meal. In the most observant households, working, using technology, or engaging in physical labor is avoided.

Shabbat candles are traditionally lit in the home eighteen minutes before sundown on Friday to usher in Shabbat. Candles are also used in this way to welcome most Jewish holidays. Two candlesticks have become one of the most distinctive symbols of Shabbat, along with challah (braided ceremonial bread). While Shabbat candles are traditionally lit in pairs, in some families, one additional candle is lit for each family member.

To familiarize yourself with the traditions of Shabbat, we recommend watching this video:

- [Shabbat 101—BimBam](#)

Pre-visit suggestions for parents

Be proactive in your school community by introducing yourself as a Jewish family to your child's teacher and sharing the calendar below. This calendar will help administrators and teachers avoid scheduling events, programs, and exams at times that conflict with Jewish holidays.

- [JCRC Calendar of Jewish Holidays and Traditions](#)

While the activity below can be done at any time, a great time to conduct this session is Jewish American Heritage Month in May. Contact your child's teacher and share that May is Jewish American Heritage Month and ask if there is a time over the course of the month when you may come in to share a 30- to 45-minute activity with the students that will include an explanation of the Jewish tradition of Shabbat, an art project, a story for younger grades, music, and a snack. You can share that being Jewish is an important part of your family's identity and you would like to provide a secular classroom activity that will not lead the children in any prayer and will share traditions.

Materials

You will need to bring some of your own materials. These include:

- [Air dry clay](#) (two buckets per class) or homemade playdough (pre-divided into balls the size of an orange, enough for one per student)
- Shabbat story (see suggestions at end of this resource)
- Paper plates or napkins and small cups (2–4 ounces)
- Store-bought or [homemade challah](#) (we recommend 2 challahs per class of 25-30 students)
- Grape juice
- [Music playlist](#)
- Printed color images (provided at end of the resource) or the ability to project them in the classroom

In the Classroom

We recommend doing the introduction on the floor (for grades K–2) and then asking students to move to their desks for the art project, story, and snack. If you are playing music, make sure it is cued up on your phone, or, if you are using the classroom speakers, that everything is set up prior to beginning. Gather all art materials and have them ready to be passed out by the teacher or another pre-assigned person. If you are providing a snack, ensure that it is ready to be served along with paper plates and utensils.

Introducing Yourself

Introduce yourself and explain your connection to the classroom. Talk about why you wanted to come in and share today. Explain that today, you are going to share about a little about Jewish traditions and culture, do some art, eat a traditional Jewish food, and hear a story.

Sharing Jewish Life

Share with students

Jewish people connect to being Jewish in many different ways. Some might connect to their Jewish identity as a culture, a heritage, a religion, a connection to Jewish values, or some combination of these. Many Jewish people connect to each other and to Jewish culture through language, Jewish holidays, and food. Jewish heritage might include thinking about ancestors and relatives who identified as Jewish.

Jewish people come from all over the globe and might speak lots of different languages. Hebrew is the ancient language of the Jewish people. While not all Jewish people speak Hebrew, many prayers, holidays, and names of foods are in Hebrew. Some Jewish people practice Judaism. Judaism is a religion just like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism are religions.

What is Shabbat?

Shabbat is the Jewish day of rest that occurs every week. It begins just before sunset on Friday and ends at dark on Saturday. Shabbat is the Hebrew word for “Sabbath.”

Shabbat is a special day of the week for many Jewish people, because it is a day of rest—a time to relax and spend time with family. It is an opportunity to enjoy life without the busyness of the work week.

How does one celebrate Shabbat?

Different Jewish people celebrate Shabbat in different ways. Most often, families come together to share a Friday evening meal. Shabbat candles may be lit just before sunset. Wine or grape juice is shared in a special cup, called a Kiddush cup. A braided bread that is a bit sweeter than most bread, called challah, is served. Some Jewish people go to a synagogue, a place for prayer, during Shabbat.

Shabbat is a time of rest. Rest can mean different things for different people. On Shabbat, some people do not do any form of work, which can mean things like answering the telephone or writing emails. Others like to spend time with their families or use Shabbat as a day to recharge after a long week. Some people may use the time to be in nature or simply to slow down a bit.

Shabbat ends when there are at least three stars visible in the sky on Saturday night. This is a time to say good-bye to Shabbat and the week that has passed, and to say hello to the new week.

Celebrating Shabbat connects Jewish people all around the world.

Ask students:

- When do you take time to rest? Do you think it's important to have special times dedicated to just resting?

In Jewish tradition, Shabbat (and most Jewish holidays) is welcomed by the ritual of lighting candles. A ritual is an action people do at special times, like lighting birthday candles or saying a team cheer before a sports game.

- Do you have a ritual to mark certain moments? Why might it be important to have rituals in our lives?
- How do you mark the beginning of something special?

Share the images of the Shabbat candlesticks. Ask students:

- What do you see?
- What do you notice?
- What does it remind you of?

These are examples of the types of candlesticks a person may use on Shabbat. Traditionally there are at least two candles, but some families light more.

Now, let's look at some of the designs on the candles.

A symbol is a drawing, shape, or object that represents something. In the image on the right hand side, we see the Lion of Judah and the Star of David which are both symbols of the Jewish people and are often used to decorate Jewish ritual objects.



*Shabbat Candlesticks
Hungary; Budapest
1875–1925
Silver*



*Shabbat Candlesticks
Eastern Europe
19th–20th century
Brass*

The lion imagery references the tribe of Judah and is a symbol for bravery, protection, and majesty. Judah was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, whose decedents included kings David and Solomon, who were major figures in Judaism. Unlike the more common tradition of lighting two candles on Shabbat, this candleholder was designed to hold three.

Art Project

Explain to the class

The most recognizable food of Shabbat is challah. We are now going to braid some playdough so everyone can see what it's like to make challah. Then, we'll get to eat some real challah!

If possible, model the steps below before giving the students their "challah dough." Then, once you hand out the dough, model it again step-by-step, allowing time between each step. Note: playdough and air dry clay should take about a day to dry and then students may take their "challah" home. If they would like, they may decorate it with markers once fully dried

Music Playlist: Listen to this [Shabbat playlist](#) while braiding challah!

Sample Project



Snack and Read Aloud

GRADES K–2

Read a Shabbat story out loud. Serve each student a portion of challah and grape juice.

Recommended Reading

For Grades K–2:

- [Challah Day](#)
- [Miryam's Dance](#)

For classroom library in older grades:

- [Tales for the Seventh Day: A Collection of Sabbath Stories](#)

Snack and Music

GRADES 3+

Continue listening to the music [playlist](#) as each student is served a portion of challah and grape juice.

Closing

Being Jewish is expressed in many ways. The examples of candlesticks and challah are two traditions practiced by some Jewish people and are recognizable symbols that connect Jewish people all over the world to one other.

Ask the Students:

- How does it feel to learn about another culture?
- What connections can you make to your own lives?
- What more are you curious about?

Thank everyone for giving you the opportunity to share about Jewish culture. Acknowledge how special and wonderful each person's traditions are and that we have so much to learn from each other. Thank them for taking the time to learn about your family's culture.



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