

Expressions and Greetings

What is the proper Jewish thing to say when someone tells you she's pregnant? How do you wish someone a happy holiday in Hebrew? Below are some common Jewish phrases and expressions to answer these questions and more.

Sabbath-Related Greetings

Shabbat Shalom (shah-BAHT shah-LOHM)

Hebrew. Literally, Sabbath peace or peaceful Sabbath. This is an appropriate greeting at any time on Shabbat, although it is most commonly used at the end of a shabbat service.

Gut Shabbes (GUT SHAH-biss; gut rhymes with put)

Yiddish. Literally, good Sabbath. Like Shabbat shalom, this is a general, all-purpose Shabbat greeting. In my experience, gut Shabbes is more likely to be used in general conversation or when greeting people, while Shabbat shalom is more commonly used at the conclusion of a service.

Shavua Tov (shah-VOO-ah TOHV)

Hebrew. Literally, good week. This greeting is used after Havdalah (the ceremony marking the conclusion of Shabbat), to wish someone a good forthcoming week.

Holiday Greetings

Chag Sameach (KHAHG sah-MEHY-ahkh)

Hebrew. Literally, joyous festival. This is an appropriate greeting for just about any holiday, but it's especially appropriate for Sukkot, Shavu'ot and Pesach (Passover), which are technically the only festivals (the other holidays are holidays, not festivals).

Gut Yontiff (GUT YAHN-tiff; gut rhymes with put)

Yiddish. Literally, good holiday. This greeting can be used for any holiday, not necessarily a festival.

L'Shanah Tovah (li-SHAH-nuh TOH-vuh; li-shah-NAH toh-VAH)

Hebrew. Lit. for a good year. A common greeting during Rosh Hashanah and Days of Awe. It is an abbreviation of L'shanah tovah tikatev v'taihatem (May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year).

Please, don't wish people a Happy Yom Kippur; it's not considered a happy holiday.

Other Expressions

Shalom (shah-LOHM)

Hebrew. Literally, peace. A way of saying "hello" or "goodbye."

Mazel Tov (MAH-zl TAWV)

Yiddish/Hebrew. Literally, good luck. This is the traditional way of expressing congratulations. "Mazel tov!" is the correct and traditional response upon hearing that a person has gotten engaged or married, has had a child, or has become a bar mitzvah. It can be used to congratulate someone for getting a new job, graduating from college, or any other happy event. Note that this term is *not* used in the way that the expression "good luck" is used in English; that is, it should *not* be used to wish someone luck in the future. Rather, it is an expression of pleasure at the good luck someone has already had.

Yasher koach (YAH-shehyr KOH-ahkh)

Hebrew. Literally, straight strength. Figuratively, may you have strength, or may your strength be increased. A way of congratulating someone for performing a mitzvah or other good deed. In essence, you are wishing this person the strength to continue doing this good thing, and you are also recognizing the effort that the person put into doing this good thing. It is most commonly used in synagogue, to congratulate someone after he or she has participated in some aspect of the service. Strictly speaking, this is a masculine form. Some people use the feminine form when expressing the same sentiment for a woman, but that is unusual.

L'Chayim (li-KHAY-eem)

Yiddish/Hebrew. Literally, to life. The toast you offer before drinking wine or other alcoholic beverages, used the way you would use "Cheers!" in English.