

Challah-ween: Is Judaism at odds with Halloween?

Enduring Understandings

- Some Jews find participating in Halloween to be against halakhah
- Some American Jews find value in taking part in an American cultural ritual
- The lure and timing of Halloween can lead to challenges to Jewish educators

Objectives: Participants will be able to...

... Name several issues regarding the tension between Halloween and Judaism

... Describe their personal and professional responses to this tension

Materials:

Pens, Posters with texts, Sign In Sheet

Set induction: Introductions (10 min- Lynn)

Name; Year; Program; Question: Have you ever experienced a tension between Halloween and Judaism?

Activity 1: Commentaries (25 min- Sarah)

Participants will walk around adding their comments to each of three posterboard “Talmud pages” representing different opinions (as well as added commentary from “To Halloween or Not? That is a Jewish Identity Question”):

1. **Jews Don't Do Halloween (“apart from” American life)**
2. **Creative/Integrative Solutions (compromise, embracing dissonance)**
3. **At Home in America (“a part of” American life)**

Activity 2: Real Life Scenario (10 min- Lynn)

You are the rabbi/educator at a large synagogue. Your education committee approaches you and asks you to cancel religious school in deference to Halloween. What do you do, assuming that October 31 is a weekday on which your religious school operates? Would your decision be different if Halloween fell on Sunday and Sunday classes were the issue?

Activity 3: Synthesis (5 min- Sarah)

Whip around the room to share something new we might have learned/thought about from this discussion.

Trick Or Treat

by Rabbi Edward Feinstein (~ 2005)

I take my kids trick-or-treating on Halloween. The truth is that you don't find many rabbis out on Halloween. Many of my congregants are surprised, even upset, to find their rabbi and his kids in costume celebrating a holiday that has definite Christian and pagan origins. And my kids certainly don't need any more candy in their daily diet. But something remarkable happens on Halloween, something I want my kids to see: On Halloween, we open our homes to one another. On Halloween, we come out from behind solid-core doors and dead-bolts locks and electronic burglar alarms. The doorbell is met, not with a gruff "Whose there?" and a suspicious eye in the peep-hole, but with a smile and sweets. On Halloween, and only on Halloween, we pretend we are a neighborhood again...families from disparate backgrounds who share common civic values, making life together in a common space. If only once a year, I want my kids to see what it's like when fear subsides, and people trust one another enough to open their doors. So we canvassed the neighborhood, and dragged home bagfuls of candies. And after three Snickers bars and a Tootsie Roll, the kids went to bed, to dream of a warm and loving community, where homes are open, and kids are cared for, and everyone dresses up as goblins and ghosts to have a good time.

In the world in which I live, Halloween is in no way a religious holiday in any way for any one I know, nor has it been for as long as any of the people I know can remember and then some. I don't deny that for a few religious Christians and a few pagans, Halloween might mean something, but its lived reality in the US is so utterly disconnected from any religious tradition AND it's such a rare opportunity to engage in lighthearted neighborhood bonding and to participate in communal ritual in American public life. I like it. It is on my observation and opinion harmless and enjoyable. There are so many things we do and don't do that separate them from the folks around us--I'm glad for the chance to participate in something with my neighbors.

Halloween is a great example of how holidays can change meaning over time. Halloween started as a Celtic holiday to celebrate the harvest, like holidays in most cultures at this time of year. The Celts, however, believed that the holiday posed danger because the dead could interfere with the living on this day.

The holiday was later appropriated by Christians as the eve of All Saints Day, observed on November 1. The name of the holiday reflects its observance as "All Hallows Even." In one medieval custom, poor people would travel from house to house on All Saints Day asking for food in exchange for prayers for the dead. Halloween is no longer observed by the

church in any way on October 31.

When Halloween hit America, it took on yet another meaning. On these shores, the holiday became an amalgam of symbols from the Celtic holiday, the Christian custom of traveling from house to house, harvest symbols (like the Jack O'-lantern), and contemporary symbols of fright and death. The holiday, as it is observed in America, has entirely lost its connection to any religious meaning or observance.

There is no religious reason why contemporary Jews should not celebrate Halloween as it is commonly observed by dressing in costumes, giving children candies and other treats, and by taking our own young children out to "Trick-or-Treat." As a secular holiday, Halloween should be no more problematic for Reform Jews than are Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July. Halloween's focus on fright and death can be a good opportunity for talking to young children about their fears, although it should not be taken to excess.

Halloween & Halakhah

By Rabbi Michael Broyde

In order to answer this question, a certain background into the nature of the prohibition to imitate Gentile customs must be understood. Tosafot [a medieval Talmud commentary] understands that two distinctly different types of customs are forbidden by the prohibition of imitating Gentile customs found in Leviticus 18:3. The first is idolatrous customs and the second is foolish customs found in the Gentile community, even if their origins are not idolatrous. Rabbenu Nissim (Ran) and Maharik disagree and rule that only customs that have a basis in idolatrous practices are prohibited. Apparently foolish--but secular--customs are permissible so long as they have a reasonable explanation (and are not immodest). Normative halakhah follows the ruling of the Ran and Maharik.

As noted by Rama [Rabbi Moshe Isserles, c. 1525-1572] "Those practices done as a [Gentile] custom or law with no reason one suspects that it is an idolatrous practice or that there is a taint of idolatrous origins; however, those customs which are practiced for a reason, such as the physician who wears a special garment to identify him as a doctor, can be done; the same is true for any custom done out of honor or any other reason is permissible." Rabbi Isserles is thus clearly prohibiting observing customs that have pagan origins, or even which might have pagan origins. His opinion, the most lenient found in normative halakhah, is the one we follow.

Of course, independent of the halakhic obligation to avoid Gentile religious customs, Jewish law forbids a Jew from actually celebrating idolatrous religious events himself. Based on this, in order to justify candy collection on Halloween, one would have to accept the truthfulness of any of the following assertions:

1. Halloween celebrations have a secular origin.
2. The conduct of the individuals "celebrating Halloween" can be rationally explained independent of Halloween.
3. The pagan origins of Halloween or the Catholic response to it are so deeply hidden that they have disappeared, and the celebrations can be attributed to some secular source or reason.
4. The activities memorialized by Halloween are actually consistent with the Jewish tradition.

I believe that none of these statements are true. Halloween, since it has its origins in a pagan practice, and lacks any overt rational reason for its celebration other than its pagan origins or the Catholic response to it, is governed by the statement of Rabbi Isserles that such conduct is prohibited as its origins taint it. One should not send one's children out to trick or treat on Halloween, or otherwise celebrate the holiday.

I can't help being turned off by the nonsensical, free-associational, hyperactive, sophomoric use of symbols and images. Pumpkins and ghosts and witches and cats and sprayed shaving cream and spidermen and princesses... It all seems so unmoored from any meaningful system to me, so random, so thin.

I do not let my children trick or treat, nor do we answer the door for trick-or-treaters. The reason we do not participate at all in this holiday, apart from the simple fact that it is a pagan holiday, is that I believe strongly that living in a country where the majority culture and religion is not ours, we must be as vigilant as possible to build Jewish memories, culture and associations for our children whenever possible. Although I think that virtually nobody in America celebrates Halloween as a religious holiday (just as many do not celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday), the fact is that Halloween is a holiday that is not ours, and I do not want my children to have childhood memories that involve celebrating non-Jewish holidays.

Let me tell you about a wonderful Jewish holiday: once a year, our children dress up as sages, princesses, heroes and clowns. They drop by the homes of our community, visit the infirm and the aged, spreading joy and laughter. They bring gifts of food and drink and collect *tzedakah* (charity) for the needy.

You guessed it--it's called Purim, when it's customary to send *mishloach manot*--gifts of food--to one's friends and even more gifts to those in hard times. Flip it over (October instead of March, demanding instead of giving, scaring instead of rejoicing, demons instead of sages, etc.) and you have Halloween. There you have it: a choice of one of two messages you can give to your children. I call that a choice, because one of the beautiful things about kids is that, unlike adults, they don't do too well receiving two conflicting messages at once.

I know how hard it is to be different, but as Jews, we have been doing just that for most of our 3,800 years. Since Abraham and Sarah broke away from the Sumerian cult of gods and demons, we have lived amongst other peoples while being very different from them. And we dramatically changed the world by being that way.

That's a proud and nurturing role for any child: To be a leader and not a follower, to be a model of what should be rather than of what is. Make your kids feel that they are the vanguard. They belong to a people who have been entrusted with the mission to be a light to the nations--not an ominous light inside a pumpkin, but a light that stands out and above and shows everyone where to go. Forget about Halloween and wait for Purim to turn the neighborhood upside down!

Make Friends and Have Fun: Challah-ween

A Synagogue Event October 2008

No, not the one with pumpkins and small, short goblins - it's our special synagogue version. On Sunday evening, October 26th, Or Ami will be transformed into a Challah-ween social center with games, food and fun. Children, parents, grandparents, singles and couples gather for bingo, adults-only Texas Hold 'Em and Teen Poker. The food is delicious. Every child goes home with a prize (often more than one). If you are joining us for delicious dinner, it starts at 5:00 pm. Cost is \$6.00 for kids 5 and under, \$12 for everyone else. If you are just coming for the games, they start at 6:00. Bingo is \$5 per card. The buy-in for poker starts at \$36. Teen Poker will be for ages 13-17 and an adults-only Texas Hold Em tournament will run from 6-7pm.

My son and I did have a very interesting discussion about Halloween and why his Jewish day school was not celebrating it (unlike Jewish holidays and American holidays) while his cousin's public school was. We also talked about how different families make different choices, which is why some of his classmates were getting dressed up and going trick or treating and others weren't. It was worth the whole holiday just for these discussions!

One other interesting comment - one the way home, my son asked if we would have Halloween again tomorrow. At first I thought it was a strange question, but then I realized, he is much more familiar with multi-day holidays than with holidays celebrated for only one day!

I just keep thinking, along with Seinfeld, "Getcandy-Getcandy-Getcandy-Getcandy-Getcandy-Getcandy..." In my neighborhood, we have a few interesting kinds of parallels to trick-or-treating on Halloween. For example:

1. On Sukkot, the kids of the whole community rove around the neighborhood in packs, going from sukkah to sukkah, trooping in and learning a few minutes of Torah with the parent(s) in each home, as they devour the junk food which is offered. This goes on for hours and hours, and amounts to a lot of junk food for each kid and, happily, a lot of Torah discussion. One group of kids learns one chapter of Mishnah Sukkah in each sukkah, and by the end have finished the tractate (then they get to have a siyyum [party] to celebrate that too...). But to my mind it's different in a lot of ways from Halloween -- not only does it have content to accompany the candy, but the content is Jewish (not to mention the lack of pagan and Christian associations).

2. At regular intervals, kids come around collecting, but not collecting candy, and not for themselves -- either collecting tzedakah for one cause or other, or collecting food for people who need it, or the like. These are fun events for the kids, part of their youth group or school-based activities, and I remember doing this as a kid and that there was competition among the kids to raise the most tzedakah etc., but again, there's content, and it's Jewish.

3. Hundreds of kids go to the Rabbi's shiur (Torah class) for kids on Tuesday afternoons every week (half hour for each age group), and they are rewarded with "points" which lead to prizes, along with a generous weekly dose of junk food. The kids (at least the ones I know best) come home knowing what was said, having enjoyed the shiur, with the beginning of a connection to the Rabbi, and still munching the junk food. The Rabbi gets to know the kids too.

4. Saturday nights, we have "Yesh Torah, Yesh Pizza." Kids learn Torah with parents for an hour or so, then there is a raffle with the kids desperately hoping to win prizes both real and ridiculous, then they serve pizza. Torah + Torah connection with parent + food = perfect Jewish ritual.

In a weekly synagogue email, this notice from a board member appeared:

There is a new way to collect Halloween treats *and* help provide life-saving nutrition for children around the world: the FEED Trick-or-Treat bag to benefit UNICEF! The bags launch September 15 on Home Shopping Network (HSN) and www.hsn.com/hsncares.

For every bag purchased through October 16, HSN will donate \$3.50 to UNICEF nutrition programs, to provide enough micronutrient powders for one child for one year! HSN is not making any profit from the sales of the bag. Malnutrition is the underlying cause in up to half of preventable deaths of children under five. For 60 years Americans have raised nearly \$160 million through "Trick-or-Treat for UNICEF" to help save and improve children's lives around the world. Visit www.trickortreatforunicef.org to learn more.