

Shabbat Parashat Hayyei Sarah
Should Jewish Families Celebrate Halloween?

Living as Jews in the modern world today is, in many ways, much more difficult than it was when we lived in small autonomous communities, free from the influences and lifestyles of larger surrounding cultures. Life in an open and pluralistic country makes us just one of the many patches in the quilted fabric of Canada, exposed both to all that is good about freedom and democracy and to customs, practices, and holidays that are not our own. As Jews who choose to integrate ourselves into the modern world, we must find a balance between emphasizing our Jewish uniqueness and finding comfort with what larger society has to offer. A decision about Halloween is one that we must make every year.

Four thousand years ago, a man named Abram (later Abraham) faced a similar dilemma. He grew up in a land where pagan religions were the norm, while he had come to a realization that he was different and believed differently. Abram realized the concept of the one and only God and, after having acted upon his new-found understanding of the world, was spoken to by God. Just two Shabbatot ago, we read from the Torah about how he was told that he must leave his land, the place where he was born, and his father's house for a new place where he could settle his family in a new faith without the influences of the larger pagan population. Abram needed to create a safe distance between himself and the pagan peoples and nations in order to ensure the birth and on-going existence of the new "ONE-GOD BELIEF." Over the course of his lifetime, Avraham establishes a new family and new faith tradition through his covenant with God. As a result of Avraham's pioneering, brave and faithful choice, we exist as a Jewish people today.

Thinking about Avraham's life and efforts in the context of this season in the modern world juxtaposes the Jewish need to maintain our identity and individuality with the forces of a larger society that often influence us to stray from Jewish practice or absorb seemingly "secular" holidays into our own practices. The reality of Halloween is that while it has become highly secularized, its roots are deep in both pagan and Christian rites. Jewish law is clear that the observance of such non-Jewish holidays is not permitted. And if Avraham were here to answer the question of whether or not a Jew should celebrate Halloween, he may reply by asking rhetorically, "Did I accept God's command to move my family away from my native land to establish our people and faith so that you could do just the opposite in your land and with Halloween?"

Abraham's choice and example are just one reason why Halloween is not an appropriate choice for Jews today. Halloween, as it is now practiced, encourages gluttony as children march through the streets requesting treats from neighbors, hoping to collect as many sweets as possible without remembering the Jewish emphasis on the divine origins of all that we consume. Of no minor significance as well is the issue of *kashrut* related to the candies that the children will collect. Seeing that most of the homes from which children collect their goodies are not Jewish, it is most likely that what they will receive will not be kosher and, therefore, traditionally forbidden to eat. Finally, and perhaps most significant, is the fact that we already have a festival that encourages us to dress up in costumes and have festive meals: Purim. If our children and families are looking for an occasion to be able to celebrate a day with costumes, then why not choose the Jewish holiday to do so? There is something powerful in saying "no" to something from outside Jewish tradition and "yes" to that which has been ours for centuries. So, instead of decorating your home, dressing up in costume and going out trick or treating for Halloween, be the "family that gives out the candy" and take a strong stand for who we are as Canadian **Jews**.

Shabbat Shalom!