

Shabbat Parashat Noah/Shabbat Rosh Hodesh Marheshvan Should Jewish Families Celebrate Halloween?

Living as Jews in the modern world today is, in many ways, much more difficult than it was when Jews lived in small autonomous communities free from the influences and lifestyles of larger surrounding cultures. Life in an open and pluralistic country has caused us to become 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 choice about Halloween is one that we must make every year.

Halloween has a long history of development since it was first a pagan holiday observed in Great Britain by the Druids at the harvest season. They would light large bonfires in order to ward off evil spirits. The Celts used Halloween as an occasion to experiment with magical practices in order to see into the future. These traditions originated approximately one thousand years before the birth of Christianity. When the Roman Empire took over control of British territory, they added the worship of pagan harvest goddesses to the customs of Halloween in order that it would be more in line with Roman religion. Christianity became the next institution to confront Halloween, absorbing the holiday into its calendar, but adding All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day immediately afterward, with Halloween taking on the second name of All Hallow's Eve. Nowadays, Halloween, like many other holidays, has become secularized and commercialized, with much of its original meaning being lost. This short history provides the Jewish community with the necessary information to be able to ask if it is appropriate for Jews to celebrate Halloween.

One of the main goals of the Torah and the Rabbis was simultaneously to establish Jewish law and custom and to distinguish Judaism and Jews from the surrounding nations, religions, and cultures. This is one of the rationales behind, for example, the observances of the laws of *kashrut* and the prohibition against idol worship. We are commanded to keep a distance between our observances and celebrations of other religions. In fact, it is clear that we are not permitted to observe the holidays of other religions. Therefore, Jews are confronted with the questions of whether or not we are permitted to or should celebrate Halloween given its origins and evolution.

Halloween's associations with paganism and then Christianity put it in a dubious position. The fires and costumes and symbols associated with the holiday originated in efforts to ward off evil spirits, "religious" practices that do not have a place in Judaism. However, the celebration of Halloween in our modern context has lost most, if not all, of this meaning. Now, children dress up and houses are decorated for purely mundane purposes. Therefore, it could not be said from a purely legalistic standpoint that the observance of Halloween is forbidden by Jewish law. However, is celebrating Halloween in the spirit of Jewish practice? Should Jewish parents permit their children to go out trick or treating or to attend Halloween parties? Tradition certainly suggests against it. When our tradition has gone to such lengths to attempt to teach us that we should be proud of what makes Judaism unique and different, it is improper for us to choose to celebrate a holiday with origins in paganism that later became part of the Christian tradition. In addition, 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, 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 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, not just Canadians.

Shabbat Shalom and Hodesh Tov!!