

# *A Jewish Exploration of Halloween – Study Session*

*By: Rabbi Jeremy Fine*

## **The Verse - VaYikra (Leviticus) 18:3**

כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יֹשְׁבֹתֶם-בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּכַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ-

כַּנְעַן אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְבִיא אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּבַחֲקֹתֵיהֶם לֹא תִלְכּוּ:

“You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices.”



### ***Rabbi Michael Broyde's Stance on the Permissibility of Non-Jewish Holidays***

- 1) [The holiday] celebrations have a secular origin.
- 2) The conduct of the individuals “celebrating [the holiday]” can be rationally explained independent of [the holiday].
- 3) The pagan origins of [the holiday] 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 [the holiday] are actually consistent with the Jewish tradition.

Broyde, Michael J. *Is Thanksgiving Kosher?* <http://tfdixie.com/special/thanksg.htm>

## ***Do Halloween celebrations have a secular origin?***



### **What is Halloween?**

- 1) “Halloween has pagan roots (principally the Celtic Samhain), and I believe those were very important in shaping the holiday (not all Halloween scholars share that opinion, by the way). However, the Catholic observances of All Saints Day and All Souls Day were equally important in molding Halloween. However, in the contemporary observance, I think we can safely say that it has become largely divergent from the Catholic holidays. In some parts of Europe, they now celebrate both Halloween and All Saints Day as completely separate entities. In America, I suspect that most of those who enjoy the holiday probably don't even know exactly what the name means, and may be partly or completely unfamiliar with All Saints Day on November 1st (only one state in the U.S., Louisiana, has November 1st listed as an official state holiday).  
The holiday's importation from Britain and Ireland also figures into its American history. The British actually banned the celebration of all Catholic festivals in the 17th century, but of course the Irish continued to celebrate All

Saints and All Souls. When the Irish came to America after the Potato Famine in the mid-19th century, they brought Halloween with them, but the middle-class American Victorians (who tended to copy their British kin) claimed it as a secular celebration. By the time you get to the latter part of the 20th century, retailing gets involved, further removing the holiday from any religious connotation.” - Morton, Lisa. Interview. 12/15/12



- 2) “Trick or treat is completely secular. It came about mainly in the 1930s as a way to buy off mischievous pranksters. Occasionally someone will try to claim that the costuming and begging aspects come from the earlier tradition of ‘souling’ - when beggars went house-to-house in Britain begging food in exchange for offering songs or prayers on behalf of souls in Purgatory - but there's absolutely no evidence for this at all.” - Morton, Lisa. Interview (continued). 12/21/12

***The conduct of the individuals “celebrating Halloween” can be rationally explained independent of Halloween.***

- 1) “I think it is conduct of the pious to avoid explicitly celebrating Valentine’s Day with a Valentine’s day card, although bringing home chocolate, flowers, or even jewelry to one’s beloved is always a nice idea all year around, including February 14.” - Broyde, Michael J. From Thanksgiving Day to Valentine’s Day: Celebrating Secular Holidays in America According to Halacha. [http://www.yutorah.org/\\_materials/broyde\\_101010.pdf](http://www.yutorah.org/_materials/broyde_101010.pdf). October 2010.



- 2) “You may imitate the nations among whom you live in everything which has been adopted by them on rational grounds, and not on grounds which belong to their religion or are immoral; but do not imitate anything which is irrational or has been adopted on grounds derived from their religion, or for forbidden or immoral purposes. You may not, therefore, join in celebrating their holy days, or observe customs which have their basis in their religious views. You must not, however, do anything which will disturb their holy days or mar their festival spirit; and do not parade your non-participation in their holy days in a manner that might arouse animosity.” - Leviticus 18:3 Commentary. Artscroll Series. Brooklyn NY. 1998. P.649

**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.**

- 1) “Thus, it is obvious in my opinion, that even in a case where something would be considered a prohibited Gentile custom, if many people do it for reasons unrelated to their religion or law, but rather because it is pleasurable to them, there is no prohibition of imitating Gentile custom. So too, it is obvious that if Gentiles were to make a religious law to eat a particular item that is good to eat, *Halacha* [Jewish law] would not prohibit eating that item. So too, any item of pleasure in the world cannot be prohibited merely because Gentiles do so out of religious observance.” – Broyde. From Thanksgiving Day to Valentine’s Day



- 2) “And [the prohibition] is not because there is a suspicion of looking as though one were rejoicing on the idolatrous festival (*yom ed shel avodah zarah*) like the gentiles, for behold this is not a festival that the priests created, but rather they (gentiles) created the joyous event of their own accord. And even if perhaps then the gentiles who did this were idolaters, and in their words were

expressions of praise for idolatry, it is no longer relevant in more recent years, when others also began to establish festive meals on this day, and they had no involvement in any idolatry...And also they do not offer sacrifices, and there is no offering to idolatry...even on their festivals.” – Berkowitz, Beth. *Defining Jewish*

*Difference: From Antiquity to the Present.* Cambridge University Press. Cambridge UK. 2012. P.221

- 3) “Halloween, unlike Thanksgiving has in its origins religious beliefs that are foreign to Judaism, and whose beliefs are prohibited to us as Jews. On the other, notwithstanding the origins of Halloween, one must recognize that the vast majority of the people in America who currently celebrate Halloween do not do so out of any sense of religious observance or feeling. Indeed, one is hard pressed to find a religion in the United States that recognizes Halloween as a religious holiday.” - Broyde, Michael J. *Is Thanksgiving Kosher?*

**The activities memorialized by [the holiday] are actually consistent with the Jewish tradition.**



- 1) Bernard Bamberger comments on Leviticus 18:3; “Jews have always had to struggle with the question: To what extent should they adopt the ideas and

practices of the outside world? Such influences are in some measure inescapable. They have affected not only those who welcomed new cultural values, the medieval Jewish philosophers and the modern Reformers for example, but also the spiritual isolationists. The custom of Yahrzeit was borrowed from the Catholics after the massacres that accompanied the First Crusade; present-day Chasidim wear garb that was fashionable among Polish Gentiles two centuries ago! In general, Judaism has been able to absorb values, ideas and customs that are compatible with its basic outlook, while rejecting what could not be reconciled with the religious and ethical teachings of the Torah.” - The Torah: A Modern Commentary by Bernard J. Bamberger.

Leviticus. Bamberger. Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Page 193.

- 2) “If Feinstein can show the gentiles’s intention to be devoid of idolatry, then Feinstein can establish that practice’s secularity and, potentially, its permittedness to Jews. Feinstein’s approach to ‘their laws’ thus reflects and contributes to the trend in the United States towards the privatization of religion...For most cases that come up, what we do and what they do need not be different, whether that is because the practice is reasonable, or because the practice is originally Jewish, or because the gentile’s intention is secular, or because the Jew’s intention is pure, as [both Yosef and] Feinstein indicate it always should be and often is.” - Berkowitz

## **Further Reading: Moshe Feinstein and Secular Holidays**

- 1) “It may be an overstatement to call Feinstein a supporter of secularization, yet it is the emergence of separate religious and secular spheres that forms the core of the question posed to Feinstein about Thanksgiving: Should Thanksgiving be seen as a fully secular holiday that in no way impinges on Jewish religious practice and is therefore permitted, or is it an alternative religious practice that competes with Jewish obligations and is therefore prohibited?” - Berkowitz, Beth. P.219
  
- 2) “Feinstein affirms the fully secular character of the celebration of Thanksgiving yet sees it as still a potentially violating Jewish strictures. Feinstein’s earliest statement on the subject from June 1963 is brief: ‘And thus Thanksgiving, one should not prohibit by law, but pious people (*ba’ale nefesh*) should be strict.’ The issue here is not, as it might sound, whether Jews can celebrate Thanksgiving, but whether Jews can hold their own joyous occasions such as weddings and bar mitzvahs on Thanksgiving and thus risk appearing as though they are celebrating Thanksgiving.” - Berkowitz P.220
  
- 3) “Feinstein offers multiple proofs that Thanksgiving is not a religious holiday: it was not created by priests; it is no longer practiced largely by religious people but by secular ones; it is not marked out religiously in any way, either by the celebrants themselves or by the typical rituals of idolatry.” - Berkowitz P.221

# Conclusion

## Permitted

- 1) Passing out candy or other acceptable items to those who are trick or treating.
- 2) Trick or treating with no religious intent because of its secular origin and current state.
- 3) Carving pumpkins, ideally not as ghost or the undead, to celebrate the time of year (same conclusion as Broyde allowing Valentine's Day presents).
- 4) Dressing up in already owned or reusable ordinary clothing (same conclusion as Broyde allowing Valentine's Day presents).
- 5) Attending parties as a participant with no religious association to the holiday including prayer, meal, or Halloween specific celebrations (same conclusion as Broyde allowing Valentine's Day presents).



## Prohibited

- 1) Dressing up in immodest clothing due to *Tzniut* (modesty).
- 2) Hosting of parties that include any prayers, celebration of the religious nature of the holiday, or meals. I would suggest not hosting parties at all.
- 3) Decorating one's home in celebration of Halloween.
- 4) Vandalizing of any kind including, but not limited to, the common use of toilet paper and eggs to ruin property.
- 5) **Wearing costumes of ghost, zombies, etc. which transfer one from participating to observing.**