

Halloween

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

For me, November conjures up Guy Fawkes Night. [“Remember, remember, the 5th of November.”](#) That was when some English Catholics set up a fellow called Guy Fawkes to blow up the Houses of Parliament, while King James I and the English Lords Temporal and Spiritual were inside, so that that they could remove Protestantism from the British Isles forever. Lunatic (and bearded) religious fanatics setting off bombs in London is nothing new. They were caught, tortured, hanged, drawn and quartered, as was the custom in those very civilized days, and everyone celebrated with great gusto. Hence the most politically incorrect of traditions.

Every year we would celebrate the event with lots of fireworks and bonfires where an effigy of Guy Fawkes was burnt and the fire used to roast potatoes and chestnuts in the chilly autumnal evening air. There was a whole week’s preparation beforehand in which children paraded models and images of Guy Fawkes in wheelbarrows from house to house asking for a [“Penny for the Guy”](#). We always had fireworks at home. My father was an expert at setting them up and setting them off and we kids were given handfuls of sparklers. Every year we were solemnly warned to be careful and every year we burnt our fingers. Ah, [how things have changed](#). Nowadays in England you are more likely in November to see and hear [fireworks celebrating Diwali](#).

In my English youth I never recall hearing about or noticing Halloween. As a child I went, for a brief spell, to an Anglican primary school in the wilds of Berkshire (which explains my knowledge of carols and hymns) and heard about [All Saints’ Day](#) or All Hallows, as a Christian festival on the first day of November. It commemorates Christian saints’ and their ascent to heaven. And it seems that the name Halloween, “All Hallows Even”, derives from that.

But still, something like a witches’ [Halloween](#) probably came first. Ancient days commemorating the end of summer and the “darkness”, the sinister aura of winter. And there is an ancient Celtic festival of the dead this time of the year.

My Irish links introduced me to the tradition of [Jack O’Lantern](#), a candle inside a face carved into a pumpkin to scare away evil spirits but these were all very hallowed Christian rites, not at all profane and certainly nothing to do with witches and magic.

Many suggest it is the Irish who brought the whole Halloween shebang over to the USA where today it is all-pervading and highly commercialized. I have heard it muttered that it is really a sinister plot to corrupt innocent religious children, spread by a secret cabal of mysterious Irishmen and women in league with the little people and the World Union of Leprechauns, to dominate the universe and convert it to the force of magic and superstition. The secret greeting of conspirators in this dangerous plot is “Show me your

palm, dearie.”

I have just survived another Halloween in New York. There were hordes of little witches and magicians demanding a treat or else they would trick. Stores and apartment buildings were decorated with spiders and cobwebs. Normally sane adults wandered the streets dressed as monsters, Draculas, zombies, skeletons, devils, ghouls, demons, goblins, black cats, bats, werewolves, and crows.

In Boulder, Colorado there was an outcry because the [town police have decided that the annual streaking at midnight of naked men and women wearing nothing more than a pumpkin on their heads and sneakers on their feet, posed a serious danger to local morality](#). Meanwhile the commercial gains are enormous and vast sums spent on disguises and confectionary and alcohol have done much to scare away the evil spirits of the dreaded recession.

I was thinking of getting on my high horse and holding forth to you on the evils of magic and the corrupt pagan influences that underlie corrupt Wall Street capitalism and how alien magic is to Judaism. But then I realized how the virus has already taken hold and indeed has always been with us. The Bible spends a lot of time denouncing witchcraft, and that alone should be enough to distance ourselves from Halloween. But that did not stop King Saul consulted the Witch of Endor and he came to a messy end. The Talmud mentions ghosts and spirits and all kinds of magic spells. Certainly by medieval times it seems almost everyone believed in evil spirits. The great Isaac of Vienna had to deal with a woman who claimed a spirit slept with her, and it became very common for fallen women to argue that they had been seduced by spirits (no doubt wearing [St. Michael underwear](#)). So much so that some rabbis publicly declared this would no longer be accepted as a valid excuse!

And Kabbalah is absolutely choc-a-bloc full of magic and hocus pocus and evil spirits and dangerous forces and bad angels and all kinds of fancies. And of course there's the myth of the Golem, a totally unsubstantiated Frankenstein fancy. The saintly Rabbi of Lowe of Prague was far too intelligent a man to try con tricks like creating a superman to defend the ghetto Jews against marauding anti-Semitic sickos. He never even mentioned it himself. (Though the Talmud in Sanhedrin says that a couple of rabbis used the secrets of [Sefer Yetzirah](#) to make themselves a fat calf for their Shabbat meal.)

Jews are notoriously superstitious; wonder-rabbis with all kinds of claimed supernatural gifts play on the credulity and insecurity of so many and rake it in at the same time. And as for corrupt capitalism, let us say no more. So I guess Halloween must be Jewish after all.

Yet if it came down to a choice, I'd rather associate with non-Jewish customs that connect with a benign Divine energy than with black magic, evil spirits, and spells. If it's a choice between trees and Draculas, I'd go with the former. Still, give me a gemara to study any day.