

# Halloween Again

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Why do I feel so negatively towards Halloween? Surely it's just an opportunity for harmless fun, getting dressed up in weird costumes, festooning homes with horror characters and scenes of witches, dungeons, skeletons, blood, and fear. And what could be bad with kids running from house to house asking for sweets, candies, and gum?

Rituals in most religions are, after all, quite arbitrary and more often than not based on earlier pagan customs. Lights in winter, masks and disguises in spring, and so many of our Jewish customs are borrowed from earlier fears of evil spirits, like driving them away by breaking plates and glasses or covering mirrors and lighting candles. However it's not the ritual itself but rather what lies behind it that really matters. What is the deeper, the real message, as opposed to the superficial one? To be fair, all our major Biblical festivals were once pagan celebrations that we sanitized. But what was this sanitization? It was to require of us to think before acting and to take responsibility for our actions. A religious ritual brings us closer to religious values (or should) whereas a magic ritual brings us closer to magic and unpredictability.

In simple terms, the pagan world believed we were at the mercy of the gods of nature who determined everything that went on in the world. Humans had to placate them. Sacrificing children, rites of blood and magic were ways of winning their approval. It was a world that believed that the greatest gifts we could give were of our bodies, our bodily fluids, and our children. Paganism wanted to perpetuate the fear of the natural world rather than try to overcome fear, because that made you dependent on their magic to survive. Superstition was based on randomness—a black cat, a broken mirror, and you never knew what antidote the shaman would require.

Monotheism emerged as a counterforce to say that although God did represent and control the world, what He wanted was good behavior, good deeds, and respect for humanity. He wanted us to refine our bodies rather than simply use them. In God's religion you knew in advance everything that was expected, even if you might not have always felt able to do it all.

Monotheism introduced the "marshmallow principle" of deferring pleasure, the concepts of self-control and self-improvement. Of course we know how hard this is. How often the Israelites found it much easier, not to say more fun, to go off to pagan orgies. Everything was allowed, not forbidden. Not all pagans were the same, of course. Some tried to rationalize their gods, just as today people justify their actions, lusts, and weaknesses.

Spirits were quite useful in explaining things people didn't understand. If clothes wore out, it was because spirits were tugging at them. If you fell ill, it was because a bad spirit flew through the air to get hold of you. Or else someone else had cursed you or put an evil eye on you. Some rabbis in

the Talmud seem to have believed in evil spirits, sheidim. The Talmud even contains advice as to how to see them—spread sand at night and look for the footprints in the morning, or kill a black cat that has just given birth and spread the ashes of its placenta over your eyes. Perhaps they simply accepted the credulity of simple people, and they did not want to take their props away from them. It also gave them power and a useful tool for helping the weak and the sick.

But overwhelmingly the greatest of rabbis argued that there was no such thing as luck, “Mazal”, in Israel. It was a characteristic of the non-Jewish world, not ours. It was our actions that determined what we made of our lives, what happened to us as individuals and as a people. However, they conceded that if a people or society was doomed, innocents would suffer the consequences too. And external forces, both natural and human, could be unleashed to terrible effect. Our world was one of human choice, not helplessness in the presence of magic or ghosts. The downside, of course, was and is that humans make the wrong choices sometimes.

But why does superstition persist now amongst us after all this time? Perhaps it's because Jews suffered so much for so long that they needed emotional, magical, superstitious support and turned to any crazy idea that might help them get through the day and the night. Even now we seem helpless and confused in the face of so much antipathy.

What I have against Halloween is that it reinforces the fear of magic and evil spirits even if most people have lost the connection or refuse to make it. The witches, wizards, and devils are all symbolic of the uncontrollable pagan world. They are linked to the world of tarot cards, astrologers, and pseudo-kabbalists with their spells, their tricks, and their magic to help you cope by giving you dishonest but plausible answers.

As our society has become more scientific, more rational, and yet more stressful and demanding to live in, we seek these placebos and fake answers. We become even more superstitious and dependent. We go to horror films; we love zombies and vampires; we want to see more blood, more terror, more corpses, and more humans suffer, even as we need to know it will all turn out fine in the end because some superhero or strongman will eventually save everyone and good will triumph.

There's another issue here. We are becoming anaesthetized to blood and horror. Just as there's a danger that the violent computer games that are so popular also affect our sensitivity to suffering and pain. The jury is still out, of course, but my gut tells me that glorifying blood and gore cannot be a healthy thing.

It's true that all this nonsense can be harmless, and perhaps I am taking it too seriously. But I strongly believe if as parents we encourage such customs that do not convey the positive values that really matter, we had better make sure we give enough counterexamples of the thinking, caring, and spiritual world if we want our children to learn a positive lesson.