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Should Jewish children Trick or Treat?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

For secular Jews—and Humanistic Jews among them—who comprise half of the American Jewish scene, the question is not, “to trick or not to trick” but what kind of treats to hand out and how to regulate all that sugar intake. For most of us, Halloween is still an excuse to indulge our sweet tooth – passing out our favorite chocolates in order to have the leftovers to ourselves – though we might opt for more healthful raisins and nuts instead. We are also concerned about what costumes are acceptable and which are not, generally preferring a benign Bob the Builder over a blood-curdling goblin. In short, we welcome this holiday as part our shared American culture and the main reason we would decide our children shouldn’t participate is because they’ve aged out of this uniquely kid-centered holiday.

We all know that Halloween has its pagan origins, later co-opted by the Christian Church, when it re-cast the earlier Celtic festival, Samhain, into All-hallows, meaning All-Saints’ Day, that eventually became Halloween. But efforts at syncretism are only moderately successful. You can rename holidays as much as you like, but tell-tale signs of earlier, compelling rituals, persevere.

As Jews, we’re experts ourselves at this effort to submerge pagan Canaanite rituals into grander stories of the Exodus saga, but farmers’ earlier rituals that marked critical seasonal changes continue to show up at our seder. Likewise, the menorahs that we light at Chanuka are descendants of bonfires lit at the Winter Solstice. Nobody, of course, would think to dismiss our Jewish holidays because of their non-Jewish antecedents.

Halloween’s attraction, I think, is exactly its pagan origins. Despite all our vaunted modern and rational ideas, we have permission, ever so briefly, to think about dead spirits, demonic forces, and the uncertainty of winter closing in on us. Thankfully, those very goblins subverted the Church’s efforts to turn it into a holiday for saints, and it remains accessible for all of us to enjoy.

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer presents a view of Humanistic Judaism as a regular contributor to Moment Magazine’s “Ask the Rabbis” column. The response printed here may be slightly altered from the version that first appeared in the magazine. You can find Moment Magazine on-line at www.momentmag.com.