

Wholly Halloween

After dropping Ari off at his tennis class last Tuesday, I came home to find Matan frantically looking for something to wear. He found a Red Sox T-Shirt with David Ortiz's name and number on the back, put on his Little League baseball pants and a batter's helmet. He looked like a ballplayer.



Looking at me for reassurance, he appeared tentative.

Neither of us had ever gone trick-or-treating on Halloween; we did not really know the etiquette.

I never went trick-or-treating as a child, as I was taught that it was not part of our tradition. While we had always given out candy to our neighbors, we had never before embraced the customs of this day – we did get to eat the leftovers!

I told Matan he looked fine, and then turned to Sharon for moral support.

She told me that I should go out and accompany Matan.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, we may be letting him go out tonight, but I don't think I can go with him. And anyway, you used to go trick-or-treating when you were a kid; I don't know anything about it.”

She replied that since she was in the middle of cooking salmon and doubted that I could take over this task successfully, I had to step up to the plate.

Wearing my black suit and black *kippah* from officiating at a funeral earlier in the day, I did not think I was dressed for the occasion.



She assured me I looked fine.

You see: for me, [Halloween](#) is a complicated story. Historically, it is a pagan holiday that Christianity co-opted.

Its full name is: “All Hallows' Eve,” or “All Saints' Eve,” initiating a period on the Christian calendar dedicated to remembering the dead, including saints (hence, the name hallows), Christian martyrs, and all the departed faithful.

You could see why my parents – a fairly traditional rabbi and professor at the [Jewish Theological Seminary](#), did not go for it.

But there is more to it than that: I was traumatized by Halloween as a 6, 7, 8 and 9 year old child. You see, we lived in a parsonage, a synagogue-owned home on Long Island not far from the [Jewish Community Center of West Hempstead](#) where my father was the rabbi in the late 70's. It was known in the community that the rabbi lived in this particular home. When I woke up the morning of Halloween during the first year after we moved in, I found the entire front lawn covered in toilet paper and rotten eggs. I looked at the other homes on the block – none of them had been vandalized.



As you can imagine, that incident had a big impact on me.

And then a few years later on Halloween, swastikas were drawn on the bricks in the outside of the front wall of our home. Waking up to this act of hate deeply impacted my antipathy towards this holiday.

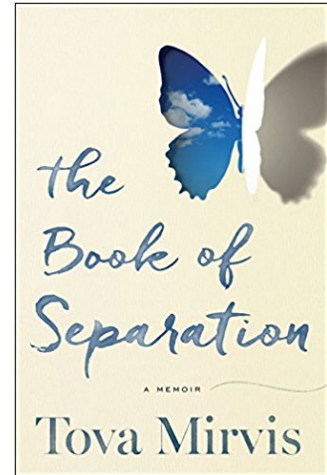
Over the years, I continued to keep my distance from this day, as not only was I traumatized, but I also did not agree with the values: go up to other people and demand a treat or you will trick them.

Despite our giving out treats, I had had my home “tricked” and it was not a pleasant experience. As you can imagine, I did not want my children to participate in this observance, which was so tainted for me.

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But this year felt different. I have been reading our friend, [Tova Mirvis](#)' rich, new memoir, [The Book of Separation](#), about her divorce and her journey away from Orthodox Judaism.

The night before Halloween I had just read that although she had never participated in Halloween and its observances, she did for the first time a few years ago, during her move away from Orthodoxy. Hearing her similar story, I realized that there was another side – that this was a day of connecting with one's neighbors, joining in a community in which we do not always get to participate.



And over the last couple of years, our street has become full of families with children. We got to know many of these families at block parties over the past two years. Our neighbors come from all different religious backgrounds: Christians, Hindus and Buddhists; some of their children attend public school and some [local independent schools](#) like ours do.

Was there any real harm in going out for some candy and saying hello to everyone?

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And what about the question of assimilation?

Sharon would argue that this is not an issue at all with Halloween, since it is a completely secular holiday and a way to participate in a fun American tradition, but I'm not sure I completely agree.



I have always been a strong believer in having some distinctions: for example, as Jews, we should participate in American holidays like Thanksgiving, but not Christmas. Now you could make the argument that Christmas is a religious holiday and Halloween has become thoroughly secularized, but is that really so?

You could make the case that both days have become overwhelmingly commercialized as American businesses have sought to make money off candy and toy sales, so maybe it's a slippery slope from celebrating Halloween to celebrating Christmas?

For me, that is one of problems with days like Halloween and [St. Valentine's Day](#): if we embrace these days, will it detract from our own distinct sense of peoplehood?

How many school-aged children in our community celebrate Halloween, and compare that number with how many children celebrate Purim? How many parents post pictures on [Facebook](#) of their children in Halloween costumes, and how many parents post pictures of their children dressed up for Purim?

Will the next generation of non-Orthodox Jews in this country even continue to celebrate Purim?

Do you see my concern?

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In this week's Torah reading, *Parashat Va'Yera*, we hear of significant moments in Abraham's life: his arguing with God to save the righteous in the cities of *S'dom* and *Amora*, his near sacrifice of his son, Isaac.

But at the end of the narrative of the Binding of Isaac, we find a significant idea. After Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, an angel tells him: "Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven [...] all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants." (Gen 22:16-18).

Now, leaving aside the challenges of the causality of this blessing (Abraham being rewarded for this morally suspect behavior), we find that all of the children of Abraham, every future Jew is blessed.

They are all part of one group: the Jewish people.

As [Rabbi Donniel Hartman](#) explained in a video from Jerusalem (which we debuted in our new installment of our monthly [iEngage](#) class this week), this represents a Judaism of Belonging. [\[Our next session will be December 13; you can still join us!\]](#) That means, that Judaism is all about being part of a group, identifying with a people. This understanding of Judaism does not require special behavior – we are in it by virtue of birth. Even if we do not practice the tradition, we are still Jewish, a Jew by Belonging.

There is another approach to Judaism. It is the Judaism of Becoming, the Judaism of Sinai – it is at Sinai where God states: "If you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession." (Ex 19:5)

This understanding of Judaism states that our relationship to this tradition is dependent on how we behave, on what we become. This has content – it is not automatic; it is about our observance of the [mitzvot](#), the commandments.

Now while our tradition encompasses both of these Judaisms: the Judaism of Belonging and the Judaism of Becoming, different groups of Jews have emphasized one or the other.



For example, most secular Israelis focus on the Judaism of Belonging as they feel a part of the Jewish people by living in a Jewish country that lives by the rhythm of the Jewish calendar – and it is fairly automatic. They do not have to “work” at this Judaism since it is all around them.

For us, it is more challenging – we have to work at it: by learning, by observance. When Jews came to this country in large numbers from Eastern Europe at the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was far easier to remain Jewish. Jews lived in largely Jewish neighborhoods – there were quotas, discrimination, and [anti-Semitism](#) that also encouraged/forced them to feel deep solidarity toward their community. But as Jews moved apart, assimilating into the larger American society, we realized that we needed more than just a feeling of belonging. They needed/we need a Judaism of Becoming – a deep engagement with our distinctive behaviors and observances.

We, of course, need both – deeper levels of commitment and practice than previous generations, as well as identifying with a sense of Jewish peoplehood.

Yet the Judaism of Belonging, especially among the next generation in the country, is on the decline. Young American Jews do not feel as strong a sense of identification with the Jewish people as previous generations did. They do not necessarily feel that pull toward other Jews, towards Israel or toward their identity as part of a separate people. And thus, the Judaism of Belonging is facing real challenges.

If we do not feel that we are a separate group, we will cease to be one. And then not only will the Jewish people not exist, its ideas, which have enriched ourselves and the world on many levels – would no longer impact this planet. That would be a terrible loss.

So the question is how do we remain a distinct entity while participating in the depth and breadth of American culture? Can we achieve both? Can we do Halloween without slipping on that slope?

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Back to Tuesday night. I went out the door with Matan wearing my black suit and *kippah*. One kid thought I was Amish, which was kind of funny.

Given the way I was dressed, I figured that I was keeping my Jewish identity, standing in the street, waiting for my son to return with chocolate bars. And we did not say trick-or-treat; we said “hi” or something like that.

And we got Twix bars – those are my favorite!

These felt like good compromises.



I talked to my neighbors about the World Series, about the strong wind storm that knocked part of a tree into my next-door neighbor’s home. We chatted with the adorable toddler who just moved in next door. We schmoozed with a couple who were drinking beers while walking their golden retrievers.

It felt like what is so wonderful about this country – people from many faiths, countries of origin, ethnicities and races all coming together in a sense of fellowship and tolerance.

It felt sort of like our Torah’s teaching about loving your neighbor as yourself was coming alive.

Our tradition has always reworked elements of other cultures, as we shaped our ideas. This Halloween, I was able to set aside the anti-Semitic Halloweens of my childhood, and embrace Halloween as a time where diverse Americans come together to share an evening out.

That’s something I can completely get behind. The truth is our country needs all the neighborliness it can get!

So, this Halloween I was able to embrace my American identity, and it should be noted, the candy we received was certified kosher, and I did say a *brakhah*, a blessing, before I ate my Twix bar. 😊