



SERMON EREV LECH L'CHA: TRICK OR TREAT?

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 30 October 2020
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 The DJ at my wedding was really anxious to tell me just how well he understood the differences between Jewish weddings and “UK-style weddings”. UK-style, noch! I don’t think he was making any sort of grand cultural statement – are Jews in fact not British? – but just couldn’t quite find the words to say what he meant.
- 2 The fact is, having a DJ at a wedding isn’t a ‘Jewish’ thing to do at all: no DJs in the Torah. But does the fact that it’s not a traditionally Jewish thing mean it’s an un-Jewish thing that should be avoided? Clearly not.
- 3 Something that causes slightly more of a dilemma for Jews, especially in the United States, is Halloween. Now, personally, I never really did Halloween growing up. Not for any religious reason, I’m just a curmudgeonly old so-and-so who hates enforced fun. But whether or not Jewish children should be allowed to go out to trick or treat (or, as we should say this year, to track-and-trace) is a hotly disputed question in certain circles.
- 4 A traditional approach might be for the anxious Jewish parent to ask themselves two questions. Firstly, are Halloween’s pagan roots far enough away from its present that we can take part without worrying that it’s actively practising a different religion? And secondly, is it still just too secular, too much part of a tradition that’s not ours? Too – and



here I'll use the Yiddish word for 'like non-Jews do', which I taught to my DJ as an alternative to "UK-style" – too goyische?

- 5 Nonetheless, maybe we'd reject the premise of both questions. We might not mind taking part in some custom with roots in another religion's practices, if that custom has simply entered into the general culture of the society in which we live.
- 6 And as for the second question, why would we remotely mind doing something goyische? The Tosafot, an influential medieval commentary on the Talmud, suggests that the traditional Jewish prohibition on 'taking part in the customs of the nations' applies not only to practices that arose from idolatry, but also to completely religiously-neutral practices that "are worthless and stupid".¹
- 7 Even for a bitter, twisted soul like mine, this particular passage from Tosafot seems to be needlessly killjoyish (or, as Yiddish-speakers would say, killjoyische). Sure, hollowing out a pumpkin and carving a face in it is a bit daft, but what's wrong with a little aimless frivolity from time to time?
- 8 In fact, in tomorrow's parashah, we read that Abraham had his own little sideline in a goyische activity: astrology. "Count the stars," God told Abraham,² and the rabbis suggest Abraham took this really literally and began religiously consulting the stars before committing himself to any action. This continued to the point that, when God revealed to Abraham that he would finally have a son, Abraham replied, "But, Creator of the Universe, I have consulted my star-chart and I will not have a son!"³ God, we're told, snapped back, "Emerge from your astrology!"



- 9 One might say that this isn't a great proof-text for the acceptance of goyische customs, because it ended with God rebuking them out of the person who practiced them. Yet it's obvious that Abraham took his astrology too far. It became more than a pleasant past-time for him. It began to control his life, and his every move, and it even led him to suppose that he knew better than God what would happen in the future. If God, directly, tells you that something is going to happen, it's probably better to believe that than to second-guess it based on what quarter Venus is in.
- 10 Abraham was a very early Jew, and he was still learning the balance. I think we're all much more confident that we can maintain a Jewish lifestyle while still participating in the occasional goyische custom, whether that's Halloween or a Remembrance Sunday parade or searching for a four-leaf clover. By all means count the stars, just don't let them become an obsession. Dress up as a ghost if that's what floats your boat, just don't start believing in ghosts (although believing in werewolves is OK, they're in the Torah; that's one for another time).⁴ So long as we maintain that balance – we don't fall for the tricks, and we don't make Halloween our only treat, we're on the right path. A pumpkin doesn't threaten Judaism and it doesn't threaten us.

Check against delivery.

GKW 30.10.20

¹ Tosafot to b.Avodah Zara 11a, sv 'V'i chukah'

² Genesis 15:5



³ b. Shabbat 156a

⁴ According to a 13th-century French Torah commentary. Buy me a drink sometime and I'll tell you about it...