

VAYEIRA (GENESIS 18:1-22:24)

Would Abraham Give Candy to Trick-or-Treaters?

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Every human being is created in the Image of G-d. (Genesis, 1: 26-27) We are required to treat every human being with deference and respect. But where do we draw the line?

Imagine this scenario. You are a Sabbath-observing Jew. You are taking a Shabbos afternoon stroll when a car pulls up next to you. The driver, also Jewish, asks you for directions. What do you do?

Without going into the entire list of Sabbath violations involved in driving, suffice it for our purposes to state that stepping on an accelerator of an internal combustion engine ignites gasoline, violating the Biblical prohibition against lighting fires on the Sabbath.

What do you do? Good manners would dictate that you politely tell the driver how to reach his destination. Jewish Law, however, dictates that you may not assist another Jew in violating Jewish Law. Should you say you don't know how to get there? You're not allowed to lie. What do you do??!!

Religious open-mindedness is a double-edged sword. When society says that anyone can believe and practice as he chooses, it allows us to live together in peace and mutual respect. On the other hand, such tolerance can also lead to compromising our own values.

Case in point. Although the overwhelming majority of Americans consider Halloween to be totally secular in nature, it has its roots in Pagan and Christian beliefs. As such, the wearing of costumes and collecting of candy, even for totally non-religious reasons, is prohibited. (See "Jewish Halloween?" and "'Collecting Candy on Halloween-Harmless Pastime or Halachic Prohibition?")

There is a ruling that permits one to give candy to trick-or-treaters who come to your door, in order to avoid offending one's neighbors. (This ruling is stated in the second link in the previous paragraph. I suspect that not all authorities would agree with that ruling.) This past Halloween, several children came to my door, and each one received candy. One group of children went to my neighbor, and then proceeded to skip my house. Now, I want to be a good neighbor. I went to the door and called out, "If you don't take this candy, I'm going to have to eat it myself!"

They quickly ran back to my door and collected their candy. The children and their mother thanked me. As I closed the door, I heard one of the kids say, "See, Mom, I told you!" Apparently, their mother realized that as religious Jews, we don't celebrate Halloween, and had told them that it would be inappropriate to ask us for candy.

She was right. I was wrong. It is a mistake that I regret. It is one thing to avoid insulting someone who has come to your door. To encourage them to come is yet another. I like my neighbors; they are nice people. But being nice to nice people doesn't require participating in their religious observances. (I am giving serious thought to spending future Halloweens away from home.)

There is a story about a famous Jewish philanthropist that is making the rounds on the Internet. I haven't been able to verify the accuracy of the story, so I present it to you with the name deleted:

One of the R. brothers passed away this summer, leaving one billion dollars. He left two wills, directing that one be opened immediately and the second be opened at the Sh'loshim (after 30 days).

Among the instructions left in the first will was a request the he be buried with a certain pair of socks that he owned. The R. children immediately brought the socks to the Chevra Kadisha (the group that prepares the body), requesting that their father be buried in them. Of course, the Chevra Kadisha refused, reminding the family that it is against the Halacha (Jewish law). They pleaded, explaining that their father was a very pious and learned man, and he obviously had a very good reason to make this request.

The Chevra Kadisha remained firm in their refusal. The family frantically summoned the Chevra Kadisha to the Beit Din (Jewish court), where the Rabbi gently explained to them, "Although your father left that request when he was on this world, now that he's in the world of truth, he surely understands that it is in his best interests to be buried without his socks. Thus, Mr. R. was buried without his socks. Thirty days later, the second will was opened, and it read something like this: "My dear children. By now, you must have buried me without my socks. I wanted you to truly understand that a man can have one billion dollars, but in the end, he cannot even take along one pair of socks!"

It's a great story, with a great ending, but I appreciated it on a personal level. I once used the same argument that the rabbi used.

A grieving family once came to me with a dilemma. "My husband was at one time rather religious," said the widow, who was personally not religious at all. "But in recent years, he got away from it. He let us know that he wanted to be cremated. But we don't want to just cremate him without a religious service of some kind. Can you help us?"

Almost all of Jewish funeral practice is based upon custom. There is almost no Biblical Law involved. One of the few exceptions is that it is absolutely forbidden to destroy a body; it must be buried.

I gave it my best shot. "I understand that your husband expressed during his lifetime the desire to be cremated upon his death. But the Torah teaches that the soul of a person lives on after his death. And I believe, with every fiber of my being, that if G-d would somehow allow us to communicate with your husband now, he would absolutely insist that we bury him according to Jewish Law and Tradition."

The family agreed. The burial took place, in full accordance with Jewish Law. The body was washed, dressed in a shroud, and buried in a simple wooden box. The children and I stayed at the cemetery in the freezing cold, shoveling dirt and filling the grave to the top with frozen clumps of dirt.

It is customary in some circles to address the deceased directly by name at the conclusion of the service. The deceased, whom I shall call “Charlie,” (not his real name) had worked as a manager in a large computer corporation. “Charlie,” I said, “in your lifetime you devoted your career to quality control. I’m here to tell you that your children did it right!”

There are, no doubt, some people who would argue that what I did was absolutely unconscionable. How could I deny that man his last wish, to be cremated?

Very simple. First of all, I am not allowed to participate in a service that violates Jewish Law. Secondly, I don’t believe that it was his last wish. It was his second-to-last wish. As the rabbi in the billionaire’s socks story said, now that he is in the world of truth, he wants a traditional burial.

I recently told the story of that almost-cremation to a non-observant Jew. I told him about my belief that the deceased now wants a kosher funeral. He asked me, “Do you *REALLY* believe that?”

I was amazed by the question. I am a rabbi. I have dedicated my life and my career to the furtherance of Torah values. I wanted to ask him, “Do you think this is all an act? Do you think I practice my religion without taking it seriously?”

The problem is that many people today view religion as interchangeable with culture. It’s all quaint custom and it really doesn’t matter what you do.

If you believe in something, if you *REALLY* believe in something, you can’t just pretend that another belief system is equally valid. A rabbi I know often says, “Tolerance is only a virtue to those who have no principles.”

I object to the term Judeo-Christian. There is no such thing. That expression implies that Judaism and Christianity are two side of the same coin.

This is why I don’t believe in interfaith services. A little bit of mine and a little bit of yours. Religious belief, whether you like it or not, is mutually exclusive. Either the Messiah has arrived or he hasn’t. By doing some of my prayers and some of your prayers and some of his prayers and some of her prayers, we are saying that G-d is either very confused, schizophrenic, or non-existent. And I’m not sure which of those options is the worst!

This is also why I don’t go to December holiday parties. I am not offended by Christians who celebrate Christmas. I’m not even offended personally by those Jews who unfortunately choose not to observe Chanukah. (Which, by the way, is a celebration of the successful efforts of a small band of dedicated

Jews who refused to water down Judaism by mixing it with foreign cultures. -- See “Bah! Humbug!”) What disappoints me is when my fellow Jews view Chanukah as a Jewish version of Christmas, complete with presents (really not a Jewish concept) and tinsel.

Interfaith advocates often point to Abraham as the father of the world’s major religions. After all, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all have their roots in the teachings of Abraham. What, one wonders, would be Abraham’s view of interfaith services?

Abraham, it would seem from first glance, was a champion of pluralism and multiculturalism. His door was always open to guests. Regardless of whom they were, his home was their home. One day he noticed three “men” (who were actually angels) walking past his home. He assumed, as we shall see later, that they were idol worshipers.

When he saw them from the entrance of his tent, he ran to greet them, bowing down to the ground. He said, “My lords, do not go on without stopping by your servant. Let some water be brought, and wash your feet. Rest under the tree. I will get a morsel of bread for you to refresh yourselves. Then you can continue on your way.” (Genesis, 18:2-4)

Abraham proceeded to wait on these strangers hand and foot. He gave them the best and freshest food. He treated them like royalty, although they did not seem to be people who shared his religious convictions.

Shortly afterwards, two of these three gentlemen came to visit Lot in Sodom, and received more of the same:

Lot saw them and got up to greet them, bowing his face to the ground. He said, “Please my lords, turn aside to my house. Spend the night, wash your feet, and then continue on your way early in the morning.” (Ibid. 19:1-2)

Abraham, and Lot, who had at one time lived with Abraham, extended great courtesy and hospitality to strangers of a different faith. But there is a distinction. Abraham said, “*Let some water be brought, and wash your feet. Rest under the tree...*” Lot said, “*Spend the night, wash your feet...*” Abraham insisted that they wash their feet immediately, while Lot was willing to let them in with dirty feet, only to wash them later.

What’s with the feet? Were they THAT dirty? Do you offer you guests a can of Dr. Scholl’s Deodorant Powder when they come to your door??!!

Rashi explains that it was common among certain nomadic tribes to worship the dust of their feet. Abraham was gracious, but he was also unwavering in his beliefs. “Please, gentleman, I would be honored to have you in my home. But I must caution you. I believe in the One G-d who created the

Heavens and the earth. If you come into my home, I must insist that you leave your gods outside!”

Our Sages tell us that when guests ate in Abraham’s home, he refused to accept payment. Instead, he asked them to praise G-d, the Source of all sustenance. Sometimes they refused. “In that case,” he said, “you’ll have to pay me!”

There are absolutes in life. Abraham loved people. He welcomed them. But there were rules. He didn’t want to offend anyone, but he refused to compromise his principles, regardless of what people thought of him.

A Christian friend of mine once asked me an interesting question. “Since you reject my belief that the Messiah has already come, do you believe that my life is a total waste of time?”

“Not at all,” I responded. I reminded him of an event that had taken place several months previously. I was putting together -- make that TRYING to put together -- a swing set. This fellow and a few of his friends from the church across the street from my home came over and helped. I offered to pay them and they adamantly refused. “Wasn’t that an act of Christian charity?” I asked. “The fact that I disagree with many of your religious beliefs doesn’t mean that I don’t respect you as a person and appreciate your kindness.”

I have often stated that Israel is very fortunate to enjoy the political support of the Christian Right in this country. They happen to believe that my religious beliefs are wrong. That’s okay. The feeling’s mutual.

You don’t have to agree with someone to respect them. You also don’t have to embrace their religious beliefs (or non-beliefs.)

When a non-Sabbath observer asks me for directions on Saturday, I am not supposed to help him violate the Sabbath. True, he obviously believes that there is nothing wrong with driving on Saturday. I, however, believe that G-d doesn’t want him to drive on Saturday. So if I refuse to assist him, am I being intolerant of his belief that what he’s doing is okay? Or, can we perhaps turn the tables around? Is he, by expecting me to help him, being intolerant of MY belief that G-d doesn’t want me to help Jews desecrate the Sabbath?

(As it turns out, the directions question is rather complex. I may not assist another Jew in violating Torah Law. I am also not allowed to lie, by saying I don’t know. The irony here is that if I refuse to help him find his destination, he’ll keep driving around, asking other people for directions, driving more miles, burning more gas, etc. One famous rabbinic authority suggested that the appropriate response is, “The reason I am giving you directions is that by doing so, I hope to reduce the amount that you drive, because Jews should not desecrate the Sabbath.”)

When we view all religious beliefs as equally valid, we are relegating religion to being simply a matter of taste and preference. You like Judaism today? Cool. Go for it. Buddhism is a little more interesting tomorrow? Go ahead; try it. You'll like it. How about a little Hindu or Islam to make it exciting?

When we view religion pluralistically, as belief in everything, we end up, in effect, believing in nothing.

Now that I think about it, it would definitely be a wonderful idea to leave my neighborhood for Halloween. Next year in Jerusalem!

Have a great Shabbos.

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