

The Millie Arbesfeld
Midreshet Yom Rishon

Sunday Morning Learning Program for Women

WWW.MIDRESHETYOMRISHON.ORG

*From Thanksgiving Day
to Valentines Day:
Celebrating Secular
Holidays in America
According to Halacha*



Rabbi Michael Broyde
ב' חשוון תשע"א • October 10, 2010

Introduction

A number of years ago I wrote an article addressing celebrating Thanksgiving according to halacha, which concluded that many halachic authorities accept that:

- 1) Thanksgiving is a secular holiday with secular origins;
- 2) While some people celebrate Thanksgiving with religious rituals, this is unusual, and does not cause Thanksgiving to be classified as a Christian holiday;
- 3) Jewish law permits one to celebrate secular holidays, but not with people who celebrate them religiously.

The article concluded that according to most decisors (including Rabbis Feinstein, Soloveitchik and many others) Jewish law permits one to have a private Thanksgiving celebration with one's Jewish or secular friends and family, so long as one does not treat Thanksgiving as a religious ritual or holiday. (See "The Celebrating of Thanksgiving at the End of November: A Secular or Religious Holiday" *J. Halacha & Contemporary Society* 30:42-66 (1995).) Such conduct is proper in my view.

Shortly after that, I was asked about trick or treating on Halloween, and I concluded that halacha prohibits celebrating Halloween, because Halloween has a clear pagan origin and in order to celebrate a holiday with a clear pagan origin one of four conditions must be met:

- 1) Halloween celebrations have an additional secular origin;
- 2) The conduct of the individuals "celebrating Halloween" can be rationally explained independent of Halloween.
- 3) The pagan origins of Halloween or the Catholic response to it are so deeply hidden that they have disappeared, and the celebrations can be attributed to some secular source or reason.
- 4) The activities memorialized by Halloween are actually consistent with the Jewish tradition.

Since it was clear to me that none of these statements are true, I concluded that celebrating Halloween was prohibited. (See "Celebrating Secular Holidays," *Emunah Magazine* 28-32 (Fall, 2000).)

This short note discusses Valentine's Day (February 14) from the view of halacha.

Valentine's Day in History

Valentine's day has a clearly Christian origin. As the Encyclopedia Britannica states:

Valentine's Day also called St. Valentine's Day (February 14) when lovers express their affection with greetings and gifts. Although there were several Christian martyrs named Valentine, the day probably took its name from a priest who was martyred about AD 270 by the emperor Claudius II Gothicus. According to legend, the priest signed a letter to his jailer's daughter, whom he had befriended and with whom he had fallen in love, "from your Valentine." The holiday also had origins in the Roman festival of Lupercalia, held in mid-February. The festival, which celebrated the coming of spring, included fertility rites and the pairing off of women with men by lottery. At the end of the 5th century, Pope Gelasius I replaced

Lupercalia with St. Valentine's Day. It came to be celebrated as a day of romance from about the 14th century.

There is no doubting the Christian origins of Saint Valentine's Day. On the other hand, I went to three stores which sell greeting cards to see what the greeting cards say about Valentine's Day and to my surprise not a single one of the many cards I looked at made any mention of the Christian origins of the holiday or even of the fact that the holiday is actually called Saint Valentine's Day and has its origins in Roman Catholic ritual. This is as well reflected in the popular messages of Valentine's Day that one sees in the general culture, which seem to be without any religious overtones at all. As attuned as I was to this issue this past February 14, I encountered not a single Christian reference in the context of Valentine's day. Indeed, I did not see a single reference to it as Saint Valentine's day in print.

Halachic Analysis of Valentine's Day and New Year's Day

In my view, the complete absence of contemporary Christian celebration of Valentine's day might reasonably allow one to conclude that Valentine's Day has lost its status completely as a gentile holiday, just as New Year's Day has lost that status in modern times. As Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (Igrot Moshe, Even Haezer 2:13) writes with regard to New Years:

On the question of celebrating any event on a holiday of Gentiles, if the holiday is based on religious beliefs [by the Gentiles], such celebrations are prohibited if deliberately scheduled on that day; even without intent, it is prohibited because of *marit ayin* . . . The first day of year for them [January 1] and Thanksgiving is not prohibited according to law, but pious people [*balai nephesh*] should be strict.

It is obvious that the status of New Year's Day has changed in the last three hundred years. In contemporary America there is little religious content or expression to New Year's Day, and while there might be many problems associated with the way some celebrate it, few would classify it as a religious holiday, as there is a clear secular method and reason to celebrate New Year's day, and thus it has lost its status as a Gentile Holiday.¹

My inclination is only to note (as Rabbi Feinstein does for New Year's Day) that the pious should be strict on the matter of celebrating Valentine's Day, even though the technical halacha permits Valentine's Day observances, as the day has completely lost its religious overtones and can be rationally explained as a celebration of love. The reason that this is so is that Valentine's Day is no longer celebrated even by Christians as a Christian holiday. It is a day of love, friendship and candy, each of which is independently explainable.

So too, Valentine's Day is quite different from Halloween, which also has lost much of its religious origins, and understanding the reason for this difference is very important. Halloween has an irrational component to it in which the form of celebrating can only be justified and explained by having it traced back to its gentile origins (dressing in costume and trick & treating). On the other hand, the mode of Valentine's Day celebrations can be explained in our secular society completely

¹ However, Terumat Hadeshen 195, writing nearly five hundred years ago classifies New Years as a religious holiday and this is quoted by Rama Yoreh Deah 148:12. Terumat Hadeshen discusses whether one may give a New Year's Day gift and refers to January First as "the eighth day of Christmas." He clearly understands the holiday as religious in nature and covered by the prohibition of assisting a Gentile in his worship. (The text of the common edition of the Shulchan Aruch here has undoubtedly been subject to considerable censorship; for an accurate rendition of the Rama, see the Rama's *Darchai Moshe* in the new edition of the Tur published by *Machon Yerushalyim*.)

rationally, grounded in such notions as sharing love, noting friendship and (perhaps most importantly) eating chocolate. Each of these values are not inherently religious or can be explained rationally, as the Rama requires for transposing actions with religious origins into secular practices that Jews can engage in. In general, Rama (YD 178:1) seems to posit that in order to permit engaging in conduct that might have pagan origins, one must show one of four things.

- 1) The debated activity has a secular origin or value.
- 2) The conduct the individuals engage in can be rationally explained independent of the gentile holiday or event.
- 3) The pagan origins of are so deeply hidden that they have disappeared, and the celebrations can be attributed to some secular source or reason.
- 4) The activities memorialized are actually consistent with the Jewish tradition.

This rationale is used by Rama to explain why Jewish doctors may wear white uniforms, even if without a doubt the origin of that practice is Christian, and this rationale explains the use of the red cross in modern times to signal medical care. If we celebrated Halloween by being nice to each other, or some other explainable secular rite, Jewish law would, I think, permit such -- but we do not.

The second important issue is the mode of celebration: even when a holiday is pagan in nature, halacha still recognizes that this does not make all modes of involvement prohibited. For example, Rabbi Feinstein (Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah 4:11(4)) notes the obvious when he states:

Thus, it is obvious in my opinion, that even in a case where something would be considered a prohibited Gentile custom, if many people do it for reasons unrelated to their religion or law, but rather because it is pleasurable to them, there is no prohibition of imitating Gentile custom. So too, it is obvious that if Gentiles were to make a religious law to eat a particular item that is good to eat, halacha would not prohibit eating that item. So too, any item of pleasure in the world cannot be prohibited merely because Gentiles do so out of religious observance.

Thus, eating chocolate on Valentine's Day and even giving chocolate to another, so long as there is not notation of why such is being giving, is clearly permissible, even if one disagreed with the analysis above and thought Valentine's Day was still a Christian holiday. The same can be said for any activity intrinsically of value, such as a husband expressing his love of his wife, or giving flowers to a beloved -- each of which would be a nice gesture all year round.

Conclusion

I think it is the conduct of the pious to avoid explicitly celebrating Valentine's day with a Valentine's day card, although bringing home chocolate, flowers or even jewelry to one's beloved is always a nice idea all year around, including on February 14.