Halloween

QUESTION FROM A READER: *Since we came to America, we celebrate Thanksgiving, is it OK for my family and I to celebrate Halloween?*
There are significant differences between Thanksgiving and Halloween. Thanksgiving is a civil holiday which has its roots in historical events, and has no traces of any practices related to idolatry. Most rabbis I know would not be opposed to celebrating Thanksgiving in America.
Halloween, on the contrary, has unmistakable pagan origins, deeply rooted in ancient idol worshipping practices. And although in our days its celebration might not be oriented toward idol worshiping, Halloween still possesses many elements related to idolatry. As we all know, idolatry or 'aboda zara is the most serious offense in Judaism. Idolatry consists of numberless rituals, superstitions, magic and mythical beliefs. One particular subject that might be considered the most prominent motif of pagan culture is "death". The aftermath was a scary mystery, which triggered extreme anxiety and agitation. Dead people, their spirits, were often an object of fear and cult. Halloween is no exception. "All-hallow-even" celebrates the "day of all (dead) saints". The Celts, that is as far as Halloween goes, celebrated Halloween at the end of the summer, a time when they believed the evil spirits and souls of the dead visited the world of the living. The idol worshippers considered the dead as Hollywood today considers the "zombies": bad and dangerous. The dead came back angry, for revenge, or to recruit newcomers. Pumpkins, which resembled the unpleasant faces of the dead, were carved to welcome them. And large fires would be lit to assist the dead finding their way into the world of the living. Food, particularly sweets, would be left outside the doors to feed the ghosts (those who assisted the dead would be left in peace by them…). Cats were specially important in Halloween because cats, they believed, could smell the presence of the invisible spirits. A black cat, however, was avoided (or killed) because witches or evil spirits reincarnated into black cats. The devil himself will come that night from inferno. The Druids, the Celtic priests—who would wear customs to make the dead think they were one of them—would knock randomly on the doors to request sacrifices for the devil or the revengeful ghosts (preferable a young son or a virgin daughter).
As you can see from this brief description, Halloween might look fun or even innocent but it is deeply rooted in idolatry and cult to death. In one way or another, most (or all) elements that were part of the old-pagan-Halloween are still present today. Therefore, we should avoid participating in any way, active or passive, in Halloween.

As a side note, I personally think Halloween provides a great educational opportunity. How so? Heavy idolatry was the norm in ancient days. We Jews fought against it since the day Abraham broke his father's idols. But many times I find it very difficult to describe to my children or my students the environment of idol worshipping. And when you realize the real dimension of 'aboda zara, the human sacrifices, the religious promiscuity and the numberless of superstitions and delusions, you really appreciate our aversion for 'aboda zara, etc. Halloween is an opportunity to help our children identify and stay away from 'aboda zara, felling proud and privileged of being the children of Abraham Abinu.

Shabbat Shalom!

Candle lighting in NYC: 5.33 pm
Shabbat ends in NYC: 6:32 pm