



**SERMON EMOR:¹
ALLOW SUBSTITUTIONS**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 9 May 2020
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 If you Google the term ‘online supermarket substitutions’, Google immediately asks, “Did you mean to search for ‘funny online supermarket substitutions?’” Those of us who shop online are all familiar with the experience of Tesco running out of lemons, say, and swapping in a lemon drizzle cake; or offering fresh tomatoes in place of ketchup, or cat food instead of dog food.
- 2 It’s all very well if one’s just doing general shopping, but if hoping to put together a particular recipe that relies on lemons or tomatoes, bad substitutions in an online shop can be a serious setback.
- 3 Our Torah portion this morning includes a substantial kit list. Oil, flour, frankincense... How they acquired all of this in the desert is anyone’s guess, but we certainly know that there were difficulties with supply later on.
- 4 The Tosefta, a very early work of Jewish law, suggests that these difficulties were an entirely standard, and very stressful, aspect of 1st- and 2nd-century Jewish life.² One of the sages, Rabbi Tarfon, declared that, because the Torah says we should light our Shabbat lights with olive oil, nothing else would do. The commandment is to use olive oil, full stop. No olive oil? No Shabbat lights.
- 5 Then something rather unusual happened. “Rabbi Yochanan ben-Nuri got up onto his feet!” That was, actually, quite an event. Debates in the study



hall were always conducted while seated. The discussions may not have been calm and tranquil, but everyone would be equal and on a level.³

- 6 And what did Rabbi Yochanan ben-Nuri think was so important that he had to stand up to say it? “And what shall the people of Babylonia, who only have sesame oil, do?” he asked. “And what about the people of Media, who only have nut oil? And the people of Alexandria, who only have radish oil, and the people of Cappadocia, who have neither this nor that but only naphtha? What should they do? No!” he said, “The prohibition only covers those substances about which it is said: One may not light with them.”
- 7 We’re all accustomed, in these strange times, to being unable to get hold of certain things. For a while it was toilet paper. Now it’s flour. Pesach was particularly difficult to stock up for, and if I found it difficult in Golders Green, I expect you all found it more so! How do you get horseradish? Eggs to burn? Come to that, what was the point when our families and communities couldn’t gather properly?
- 8 Rabbi Sue Fendrick wrote a column in *Times of Israel* in the run-up to Pesach, entitled “Go ahead, have a shvach seder”.⁴ Using a Yiddish word that, basically, means ‘rubbish’, she urged Jewish families not to feel like they had to pull out all the stops to make a corona-seder work. 2020 is shaping up to be a bit of a rotten year and she didn’t want anyone to consider themselves obligated to fix that with fancy all-singing-all-dancing well-equipped sedarim.
- 9 We might say that Rabbi Sue Fendrick’s column was singing from the same siddur as Rabbi Yochanan ben-Nuri all those years earlier. If you can’t get olive-oil, he said, don’t stress, just have shvach Shabbat.



- 10 But there's a difference: a really important difference. The seder column was about a time of emergency. Pandemic. Force majeure. We all expect the rules to be relaxed in a crisis; it seems only fair, and we wouldn't want to guilt-trip anyone for their 'failure' to get hold of horseradish in a crisis. Rabbi Sue Fendrick was talking about extraordinary times.
- 11 Rabbi Yochanan ben-Nuri, however, was talking about normal times. Ordinary life. Living in Alexandria wasn't an emergency, it was a deliberate long-term choice that some Jewish people had made. Quite a lot of Jewish people in fact. Sure, would have been unjust to penalise people for difficulties in obtaining supplies during a pandemic, but I'm not so certain that justice demands us to create special rules for permanent situations of people's own making.
- 12 And yet Yochanan ben-Nuri was right. What demands that we create special rules is not justice but our desire to be nice people and to maintain Judaism as a living tree.⁵ We want to resist a prescriptive Judaism that shames people for something entirely arbitrary. People who can get hold of olive oil maybe should use it to light their candles, if that's what the tradition says... but if people who can't make two flames with olive oil instead make two flames with radish oil (whatever that is), so what? It would take a very severe person to declare that that makes them a bad Jew. Maaaayybe it's 'their fault' for moving to a part of the world where olive oil is unobtainable, but really, it's no big deal.
- 13 Rabbi Yochanan ben-Nuri stood up on his feet not just to take part in an argument about different essential oils. No, he was on his feet to push for a Judaism that's directory, not mandatory. A Judaism that's open and



evolving. That takes account of people's different circumstances. That resists shaming.

- 14 Perhaps living through the present emergency can give us all an understanding of how difficult it can be to keep meaningful Jewish life going in times of adversity – and help us to translate that understanding back into more normal times as well.

Check against delivery.

GKW 09.05.20

¹ Leviticus 24:1-9

² tShabbat 2:3

³ Steinsaltz's commentary to bShabbat 26a, where this passage also appears

⁴ Sue Fendrick. "Go ahead, have a shvach seder", *Times of Israel* (3 April 2020): <<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/go-ahead-have-a-shvach-seder/>>

⁵ *Edwards v Attorney General for Canada* [1930] AC 124 (PC), 136