



SERMON B'SHALLACH:ⁱ YOU'RE ALL WEIRD

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 4 February 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

1 Please don't take this amiss, but you're all weird. Really weird. Every single one of you has spent your week in the modern world – video calls, live TV, Deliveroo, credit cards, Sky Sports, biros, petrol stations – and maybe you even used some of these things earlier today. But then you chose to spend the bulk of your Saturday morning watching someone chanting an ancient language from a piece of dried-out animal skin. When we throw in the fact that the words were hand-written on that dried-out animal skin using a quill-pen and ink made out of the tumours of sick trees,ⁱⁱ and that only strengthens my conclusion that you're all weird.

2 But being a little less flippant, we could just as easily conduct the entire service in English, and read a translation of the Torah portion off of an iPad instead of turning to the original. That would be just as effective in terms of prayer – God undoubtedly

speaks English – but such a service wouldn't serve our human purposes in the same way.

3 We all understand that tradition has an allure of its own. Being Jewish in a world that is non-Jewish – in fact, being a person of faith in a world that is secular – has a certain contrariwise appeal to it. It's meaningful to do things in the same way that we know they've been done, meaningfully, for countless generations. I also think there's something alluring about the simple act of being different. Everyone spends their week with video calls, live TV, Deliveroo, and the rest of it. The fact that we balance that out with something more archaic and grounded helps to build our identity.

4 Whenever I meet with someone beginning the journey towards conversion to Judaism, I always ask: "What does your family make of this?" Because it can seem like an inexplicable decision, especially here in Brighton, which the press takes great pride in labelling "the most godless city in England".ⁱⁱⁱ



5 Religion often gets a bad rap in the modern world. All too often, when religion makes it into the news, it's in the context of being cruel or backward. Cover-ups of sexual abuse, refusal to marry gay and lesbian couples, a new bishop who opposes female clergy.^{iv} It's very easy to differentiate Liberal Judaism by saying that we're nice, we're progressive, we're woke, we're inclusive. And all of that's true – or as true as we've yet learned how to be. But it doesn't take away from the fact that our practices are also archaic and backward in many ways: harmless ways, granted, but can we truly describe the waving of a lulav or the wearing of a tallit as anything but primitive or antiquated customs that have survived into the 21st century?

6 And yet there's nothing wrong with these charming and meaningful traditions. Rabbi Aharon Shmu'el Tamaret has observed: "Even when a new innovation greatly increases the efficiency of an industry, older and simpler methods are not completely neglected. Even after the invention of matches, which can produce flame in a split-second, some smokers will still carry



an old-fashioned striking-plate, because it is difficult for them to separate from their reliable and beloved methods of old, which is simple, and familiar to them.”^v It’s a shame he didn’t use a more health-conscious example, but I think we nonetheless take his point.

7 A similar phenomenon explains the allure of vintage clothes: such a concept, according to fashion historians Tracy Diane Cassidy and Hannah Rose Bennett, allows buyers to “mix in elements of the past with contemporary clothing to create new identities”.^{vi}

8 Of course, the lulav, the tallit, the old-fashioned cigarette lighter and the vintage cravat all have something in common: they’re embodied. They’re tactile. They’re something we do and feel, and we enjoy the feeling of them, the sensation. They exemplify that wonderful line from *Seinfeld*: “Why go to a fine restaurant when you can just stick something in the microwave? Why go to the park and fly a kite when you can just pop a pill?”^{vii}



9 But that doesn't explain the attraction of the Torah scroll written in ill-tree ink. The vast majority of you aren't touching it, aren't even really seeing it up close. Yet somehow, the knowledge that it's there, and that it's authentic: somehow that knowledge does something for us.

10 What we're dealing with here is counterculture. Judaism is about being different, and Liberal Judaism is all about being different again. Even the word 'Hebrew' comes from a root meaning 'apart'. As the rabbis put it: "The entire world stood on one side, and Abraham stood on the other."^{viii} If, in a given age, we're the same as everyone else, our identity has no roots. Today it's credit cards, Sky Sports and biro, but when times change, those who are wholly dependent on wider society for their sense of self will change as well. There's no authentic 'them'. But we have something different about us: of course we use credit cards, but we also listen to the clarion-call of the shofar. Of course we write with biro, but we also rely on ink made out of tree-galls.



11 Now, we said that vintage fashion is all about mixing the past with the present to create a new identity. And our Torah reading this morning, the Song of the Sea, is in many ways the Exodus equivalent of vintage fashion. It's written in an exceptionally ancient version of Biblical Hebrew, which, counter-intuitively, indicates that it's one of the more recent passages in the Torah: it was deliberately written with archaic grammar so as to feel authentic and hark back to an earlier time.^{ix} It created a fresh new identity for itself as a piece of biblical poetry.

12 The precise effect of this literary device is, admittedly, lost on us. We're not nearly closely-attuned enough to Biblical Hebrew to notice which forms are a couple of centuries older than others. I only know about it because I read it in a book. But here we are going along with this passage anyway – reading it, highlighting it – regardless. We all have a predilection for the old-fashioned. We're all weird.

13 Judaism, and Jews, thrive on being different. The Song of the Sea contains the famous words which adorn our sanctuary's



mosaic: מִי־כְמוֹךָ, *Who is like You?* (with a capital ‘Y’).^x But in the original Hebrew there are no capital letters, and we can just as well read it, *Who is like you?* (with a small ‘Y’).

14 We live unique lives in unique ways, mixing the comforts and chaos of the modern world with the comforts and complexities of our ancestors. מִי־כְמוֹנוּ, *Who is like us?* Nobody!

ⁱ Exodus 15:1-18

ⁱⁱ Jen Taylor, “Ink”, *Bet Haverim’s Torah Blog* (19 March 2012): <<https://hasoferet.com/cbh/2012/03/19/ink/>>

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel Green [with whom I was at university], “Brighton the most godless city in England, Census 2021 data reveals”, *The Argus* (1 December 2022): <<https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/23161330.brighton-godless-city-england-census-2021-reveals/>>

^{iv} On the last of these, see Martine Osborne, “Why are female clergy cheering for a bishop who doesn’t believe in female priests?”, *The Guardian* (14 January 2023).

^v *Yad Aharon*, p 10

^{vi} Tracy Diane Cassidy and Hannah Rose Bennett, “The rise of vintage fashion and the vintage consumer”, *Fashion Practice* 4 (2012), 239-262: 244.

^{vii} Andy Ackerman, dir, “The Gum”, *Seinfeld*, season 7 episode 10 (NBC: 14 December 1995).

^{viii} Genesis Rabbah 42:8

^{ix} Martin L Brenner. *The Song of the Sea* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991): 35. It should be noted that this conclusion is hotly disputed.

^x Exodus 15:11

