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The **Guardian**



A community divided

The battle over six square miles of North London

On the dividing line

To its supporters it's an unobtrusive symbolic domain and a social aid; to its opponents it represents a sectarian divide, a potential focus for anti-Semitic attacks and a ghetto. Is north London ready for the eruv?

David Sharrock

IT HAS been five years in the planning. The last five months of public controversy has given it the status of a test case with countrywide implications. Tonight Britain's largest Jewish community will learn if six square miles of north London can be transformed into an eruv, a symbolically defined area.

At roughly the same time that Barnet Council's planning committee votes on what is surely the most divisive issue it has faced, 4,000 miles away Prime Minister John Major will be sitting down with President Bill Clinton for their first talks. The White House meeting will be taking place within an eruv, though neither leader is likely to be aware of it.

"Where the Prime Minister goes, others should not fear to tread," John Marshall, MP for Hendon South, jokes. His constituency takes in part of the proposed eruv. Hartley Booth, his Tory colleague in neighbouring Finchley, is also supportive.

But humour has not featured strongly in the eruv saga, which has forced the resignation of Lord McGregor from the chairmanship of a prestigious local body and also raised fears of an extremist vigilante group patrolling its boundaries, a suggestion which has been strongly denied by its proponents as a hoax.

The council maintains that the application will be decided purely on

planning considerations and its official report recommends approval. But nobody believes that when the 20 members of the planning committee file their votes tonight they will be able to ignore the emotional arguments it has generated.

An eruv is many things to many people. To its supporters it is an instrument of social aid to young mothers, the elderly and the disabled on the sabbath, an unobtrusive symbolic domain which will do nothing to alter the lives of the other residents of Golders Green, Hampstead Garden Suburb and Hendon. To its opponents it represents a sectarian divide, a potential focus for anti-Semitic attacks and a ghetto.

The secular, Reform and Hasidic communities are all fiercely opposed, for reasons which run through the entire range of "ologies", from theology to psychology. The eruv's sponsors, members of the United Synagogue — the leading Orthodox wing of British Judaism — accuse their Jewish brothers and sisters of religious intolerance, while they are accused in turn of the same crime.

Both factions claim the support of the majority Gentile community, a rich social mix of Japanese, Nigerians and many other nationalities who account for three-quarters of the 65,000-strong population. But the spectre of anti-Semitism has stifled the debate. The result is a perception that this is a Jewish problem which has split the community.

The word eruv derives from the

Hebrew verb to mix or to blend, in the sense of the public and the private domains. The Talmudic laws forbidding carrying and pushing outside the home on the sabbath may be suspended within an eruv (an entire volume of the Talmud explains their construction). Once a symbolic walled city is erected, Orthodox Jews are absolved from the sabbath prohibitions on the pushing of prams and the use of walking sticks or wheelchairs. They are, in effect, within one large house.

In the United States of America, where they have proliferated in recent years, a guide to their construction defines an eruv as "an enclosure of walls or symbolic walls around a community which in effect creates a communal encampment". It goes on: "Symbolically and functionally, the eruv transforms the public domain into a large private domain, a fragmented and disparate community into a unified collective."

Barry Freundel is the rabbi of Keshet Israel Synagogue in Georgetown, Washington DC. Three years ago he set up the Phillip Rabinowitz Memorial Eruv, in which the White House now sits and over the past decade he has been at the fore in the construction of tens of eruvs across the US.

"A few weeks ago I had the BBC ringing me. They wanted to film an eruv. I told them there's nothing to see, you're talking about some ordinary telegraph poles connected with thin wire. The rest of it is defined by



Invisible borders . . . would the proposed eruv represent a sectarian divide in a presently rich-mix area like Golders Green?

PHOTOGRAPH: ALAN REEVELL

the Metro and the Potomac. They're innocuous, that's the critical thing."

The boom years for eruv construction in the US were the seventies and early eighties. "People made a living building them," Rabbi Freundel says. "In the early ones there was a lot of disquiet, but later on people could point to others and see that their fears were unfounded. People see this new thing, they're afraid of what it's going to do to the neighbourhood, it evokes memories that they're not sure of. It's natural."

In Barnet much of the proposed eruv's 11-mile perimeter is already defined by existing boundaries, including the M1 motorway and the London Underground's Northern Line. Where no perimeter wall exists, symbolic doorways would be erected. Barnet's eruv would require some 85 telegraph-type poles, linked in pairs with 950 yards of filament wire, to be paid for privately by those members of the United Synagogue who would use it.

In an area which already has 40,000 poles and five million feet of wire, most of the eruv's 65,000 residents would simply be unaware of its presence, its supporters claim.

It sounds innocuous enough, particularly on a wet Tuesday afternoon when a clutch of families are braving the elements to hand in a petition at Barnet's town hall. Tanya Robinson, 27, who returned from Jerusalem last August with her husband and two children, Anna, aged two, and six-months-old Ori, says: "On the sabbath I personally can't go out because I have a child who cannot walk and I can't carry. The sabbath is meant to be a family day but I can't go to the synagogue and I can't go to visit friends. It's difficult to arrange for people to come and look after them."

"The majority of my friends are in the same situation. It certainly affects hundreds of people. My husband's grandmother can't go out either because she's disabled. People should realise that even if it wasn't there it doesn't affect them. All it's doing is defining an area."

Rabbi Silberg, from Hendon synagogue, offered a traditional Jewish principle: "Zeh nehene vze lo choser, which literally means 'when one party benefits and the other party loses little or nothing, the first party shall be permitted to proceed'. I would be interested to know if the opponents have ever seen an eruv. My wife comes from Antwerp and the majority of the population doesn't even know it's there. It's invisible."

Laurence Begner accounts for the controversy by suggesting that it is the traditional British fear of the new. "The attitude of the majority of the Gentile people I've spoken to is 'So what?' It's a seven-day wonder, people will forget it's there."

But how to explain the fact that many of the eruv's most vocal opponents are Jewish themselves? Ruth Bernstein, the wife of another local rabbi, feels that the matter has brought to light latent anti-Semitism. "I think there are Jews who are not comfortable with their Judaism. If they're nice and quiet and don't make news, they'll be accepted. And they're very uncomfortable when other Jews call for an eruv."

David Schreiber, the eruv committee chairman, goes further. "There are Jews who are embarrassed by their religious background, who are determined to integrate and lose all trace of their origins. They'll find all sorts of irrational reasons to oppose it. I've met with them to try to understand their objections but couldn't put my finger on it. Their fears are harder to come to terms with. We have a traditional way of life. I don't think it's a terrible one. Maybe it's accusing them in some way."

Edward Black, an eruv committee member, admits that perhaps they have failed to get their message over to local people. "An eruv is only of any significance in our minds. The whole of Capitol Hill in Washington

is within an eruv but nobody's saying that the Jewish community there is in any sense making a territorial claim over them."

Last September the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust held its annual general meeting in unusual circumstances. For eruv opponents, the stormy meeting at which Lord McGregor resigned as chairman showed where the real intolerance lay. McGregor, who is also chairman of the Press Complaints Commission, says: "It normally consists of a small number of somnolent people, who sleep peacefully throughout. On this occasion there were over 115 people and it became clear that a very large number were there on a rent-a-mob basis."

His resignation became inevitable after he lost a vote of confidence, called for by eruv supporters at the meeting over a Trust letter to Barnet Council which raised concerns about the "divisive" nature of the eruv. Once the dust had cleared, it was discovered that 58 of the votes cast were ineligible because of their non-resident status.

McGregor says the fracas is now "water under the bridge" but he remains resolute in his opposition to the eruv. "I'm very concerned that we maintain our long tradition of religious tolerance. One only has to read the newspapers to realise on what a fragile basis it is based. No sect should act in such a way as to affront other sects. The meeting was a very unpleasant exhibition of

'The damage has already been done to community relations — it's produced a feeling of otherness which wasn't there before'

fundamentalism and it served to ring alarm bells. I cannot think why it is necessary in 1993 to utilise artefacts in an area in which the requirements of conscience have been satisfied since the beginning of the century."

Frank Davis, councillor for Hampstead Garden Suburb, is likely to lose his temper if he thinks he is being accused of anti-Semitism just because he opposes the eruv. "I was born in a Jewish slum in the East End and I know what it's like to be beaten up every day at school because I was a Jew-boy. I got thrown through a tailor's window by some Blackshirts, assisted by the police, during a Mosley demonstration. It still didn't stop me being a JP for 30 years."

Davis, who is a governor of the University of Tel Aviv, says he received a personal apology from Rabbi Alan Kimche, the prime mover behind the eruv, who described Jewish opponents to the eruv as having "absorbed an anti-Semitic way of thinking". When he votes tonight, Davis says, he will be duty-bound to put aside his Jewishness and decide the matter on its planning merits alone. But he isn't shy of describing the plan to place poles and wire in the middle of The Bishop's Avenue, Hampstead's millionaires' row, and across the A1 as "stone bonking barmy".

In response to Schreiber's claim that between 15,000 and 18,000 would benefit from the eruv, Davis offered his own calculation. "There are probably 450 locally, the majority of whom are neither invalids nor young mothers. The number who would benefit directly would probably not exceed 50, which seems to be an excessive effort, bearing in mind that there are 50,000 residents."

Roy Shutz, leader of Tory-con-

trolled Barnet Council, has heard all the arguments for and against the eruv. He remains firmly opposed and he too is sensitive about accusations of intolerance towards a religious minority. The jibe that nobody objected to a mosque in Regent's Park seemed to have lodged somewhere.

Do the successful eruvs abroad, with their extra street furniture kept to a minimum, not prove that fears of racial tension and even anti-Semitic attacks are a fantasy? "It's possible. But it will rankle, it will rankle. Although the physical manifestations will not be that great it will be there. When you drive past you will see it."

"It's not that people will be harmed by it but that there's particular consideration being given to one grouping and it's not a question of a mosque because the whole concept of this is to turn a public domain into a private one. A mosque is one building, this is six and a half square miles."

It is in Child's Hill, in the south of the proposed eruv, where many of the poles and wires will have to be erected. Ruth Elliott, secretary of the Lindale Avenue residents' association, says that the majority of locals opposed the plan but many non-Jews were afraid to voice their opposition because they didn't want to be accused of anti-Semitism.

"The eruv committee says it's pressure from the young mums which started this, but if they're that emancipated has it not occurred to them to get their menfolk to help out with the children? To me this is so much about fundamentalism, and I don't just mean Jewish. If you draw a line in which Jews can do certain things, what's to stop other religious groups demanding similar rights?"

Mrs Elliott, a member of the Reform Synagogue, does not doubt that the erection of poles and wires will provide a focus for anti-Semitic incidents. "The whole thing has raised problems which I thought had been coped with here. It is really a singularly agreeable place to live. One of the charms of the area is that people live together and mix in all sorts of ways. The damage has already been done to community relations — it's produced a feeling of otherness which wasn't there before."

It is hard to prove or deny that claim with any certainty among the non-Jewish population. Ask the shoppers in Golders Green and you will get as many views as there are nationalities living here. Miwa Okuyama, a 24-year-old Japanese student who has lived in the area for four years, approves of the eruv. "If there are different expressions of people's cultures, that's fine."

But Albert Chan, a Hong Kong Chinese, uses the same argument to oppose the eruv: "The whole area should be open." A Catholic cab driver says everyone should do as they like and an Egyptian woman says everybody should live together. Nobody is entirely sure what an eruv really is.

"Nobody's been able to explain the poles to me satisfactorily," a man who has been a resident for 25 years says. He will not give his name because of the delicacy of the matter. He's unimpressed by the American experience. "There's undercurrents in Europe which one has to take notice of. The world is changing, fundamentalism is on the rise everywhere. We've got a perfectly harmonious community with a strong Jewish element. Why try to impose this now?"

Whichever way the vote swings tonight — and councillors say it is too close to call — it is unlikely that the matter will rest there, with appeals waiting in the wings. Back in Washington, Rabbi Freundel is prepared to offer all the assistance he can to the eruv committee. "Once it's in place people will see it's harmless. I know there are other communities over there that want their own eruvs as well."

Pass Notes

No 96: Greg Dyke

Nickname (due to Guardian misprint): Reg Dyke

Age: 45

Appearance: Polytechnic sociology lecturer.

Position: Just brought in to boost ailing breakfast service GMTV; chief executive of London Weekend Television Holdings; managing director LWT Broadcasting; chairman ITV Association; chairman ITV Sport.

Background: Hayes Grammar school. "Varied career" (Who's Who) 1963-1983 includes trainee manager at Marks and Spencer; reporter on the Hillingdon Mirror, Slough Evening Mail and Newcastle Journal; politics degree at York University; campaign organiser for Wandsworth Council of Community Relations; reporter on London Weekend Television's London Programme, producer Weekend World, founding editor of the Six O'Clock Show. Appointed editor in chief of TV-am in 1983; director of programmes at TVS 1984; rejoined LWT 1987.

Biggest achievement so far: rescuing TV-am from bankruptcy by taking ratings from 200,000 to 1.8 million in 12 months with help of furry puppet called Roland Rat. Left after row with boss Bruce Gynell over budget cuts.

Worst negotiation so far: Losing Premier League football coverage to Sky.

What the tabloids call him: Roland Rat's Dad.

Possible schemes for saving GMTV if Roland Rat is unavailable: Freddie Ferret; Harry Hedgehog; Stanley Stoot; Gerry Gerbil; Willie Weasel.

Failing all these: Bruce Gynell.

His proudest moment: Playing at Wembley in a charity match before the 1987 cup final.

Friends say: Motivated, streetwise, sharp, understands popular TV.

Enemies say: Lightweight, prone to shoot mouth off, spivvy — the Arfur Daley of television management.

Earns: At least £168,000. LWT shares should make him millionaire by October.

Close friends: John Birt, Michael Grade, Howard Davies, Ray Snoddy.

Family: Lives with Sue, a part-time teacher; four children. Home in Twickenham.

In no way related to: Van; Dick van.

Don't say: "My kids loved you in Mary Poppins."

Dyke on politics: "I quite admire John Major's style of politics. It was Thatcher's style I couldn't stand."

What he says about being a rich TV executive: "It's fuck-off money. If you don't like it you can walk away."

How big is his mission to inform? Smaller than a rodent's rib.

Least likely to say: "Get me Sarah Dunant."



Past Notes

End of play for Forty-Love

February 24, 1979

A WEST END theatre producer opened his copy of the Guardian on Thursday morning, read the first two lines of the review of his new show at the Comedy Theatre, London, and decided that he would have to take it off at once, losing £35,000 in production costs.

An aggrieved but philosophical Paul Elliott, who will bring down the curtain on Forty-Love after only five performances, accused theatre critics of "crucifying" a new writer and a young management which "would not dare to put its foot in the West End for a long time".

He had taken the decision to close the show after reading the first sentence of the Guardian's review, he said. This read: "There is a moment in this evening of situation-trash when the sadness of the theatre-strapped spectator assumed terrible ironic proportions."

"It was the reference to 'trash' which did it," he said. Other national newspaper critics made this review seem positively fulsome in comparison. The Financial Times propheti-

cally described it as "a doomed menopausal farce" and the Daily Mail called it "dire and depressing".

The author, Leslie Randall, also accused the critics of wrecking the play's chance of success. Theatre critics disapproved of plays which merely intended to make people laugh and lacked a "message" he said. "We thought the critics must have been watching a different play. How could they write such things with an audience laughing all around them and applauding many punch lines?"

"I heard a great deal of laughter on Wednesday night and it was not stage laughter," Elliott said. "The critics should have said, to be fair, that there was considerable laughter and rounds of applause. I get to the stage when I think that I have no judgment and should be selling soft goods."

But Forty-Love will not join the theatrical catalogue of shame which contains the name of plays surviving the shortest time. There are several shows which have run for only one performance. The ominously titled Thirteen For Dinner lasted for only its first night in the 1950s.