

Anglo Style

Between the lines: Fear and loathing in London

A bitter battle has raged to gain permission for an eruv in Britain's capital. Charlotte Hallé finds out why

David Schreiber finds it difficult to explain why it took 15 years of fierce fighting to get planning permission to erect an eruv in north west London.

After all, such a boundary, which notionally extends the private domain and allows Orthodox Jews to be exempted from some Shabbat prohibitions, such as pushing prams and wheelchairs, exists in more than 150 towns and cities around the world, with many more in Israel.

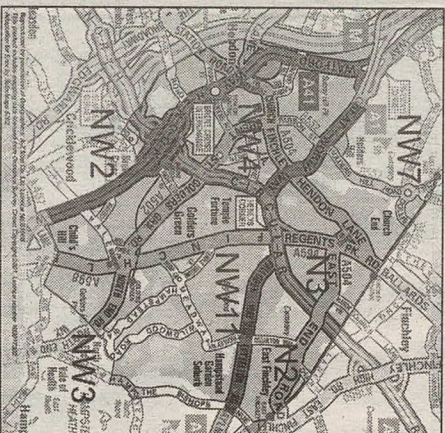
Yet, somehow in London, the capital of a nation which prides itself on being tolerant, those lobbying for the construction of an eruv have been accused of separatism, circumventing their own laws and violating human rights.

Even now, after the final piece of planning permission has come through and the first quarter of the 84 poles need to complete the 17-kilometer eruv has been constructed, those who oppose the eruv are promising to fight for its removal, with talk of taking the case to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Schreiber, a London-born Jerusalemite and one of the key players in the pro-eruv lobby, just smiles at this prospect: "I doubt it will get too far when you consider that the court itself is inside the Strasbourg eruv."

A businessman with interests both here and in the UK, Schreiber was still living in heavily-Jewish, north west London suburb of Hendon back in 1987 when local rabbi, Alan Kimche, requested congregants form a committee to organize the construction of an eruv.

"We did anticipate some opposition," recalls Schreiber, "especially from some of the all-important local councillors, whose approval was required to receive the necessary planning and legal permis-



The area of London covered by the eruv.

sion to construct the eruv."

But it was only after applying for planning permission, which brought the issue into the public domain for debate and press comment, that the depth of opposition was glimpsed. In 1992, councillors in the London borough of Barnet refused to grant planning permission for the eruv, bowing to pressure from what Schreiber describes as an unholy alliance between genuine anti-Semites, some highly vocal local residents (many of them secular Jews) and other interest groups.

At this stage, Schreiber says the eruv was largely perceived as a very freaky thing proposed by a handful of crazy religious fanatics. He says television coverage, such as a news report using scenes of barbed wire fences at Bergen Belsen as a backdrop to a letter from a Jewish resident opposing the eruv on the grounds that his Holocaust-survivor relative might view the Jewish wire as reminiscent of a ghetto, had been particularly damaging.

Only in 1993, following a government-appointed public inquiry in Barnet Town Hall, where opposition to the eruv was exposed as unjust and anti-Semitic, did the tide turn toward viewing the eruv as a reasonable amenity, which would serve 10,000 Jews and interfere very little with anyone else.

But the battle with British bureaucracy was far from over. In 1994, a major redevelopment of one of the neighborhoods within the proposed boundary meant an application for planning permission had to be resubmitted. Trunk roads reassigned to a new government body called Transport for London required a separate license, which was only signed earlier this year. The final decision on the color of the poles - gull-wing gray - took the council several months to reach, Schreiber says, being made only in July, allowing for the first post to be erected just last month, under the

spotlight of the national media. The eruv will go live, hopes Schreiber, shortly after the festival of Sukkot later this month.

Anglo Jewry gets plucky

Schreiber, who is regarded by many north Londoners as the key mover and financier behind the pro-eruv campaign, views the move to erect an eruv as a reflection of the growing self-confidence among Anglo Jewry. Previous generations of British Jews, he assesses, had not wanted to make waves or put their heads above the parapet. He says modern Orthodox women in particular have become more cosmopolitan and are increasingly aware of eruvim all over the world, seeing no reason to stay at home due to their role as careers.

This can-do mentality is also a result of a generation of Jews growing up and seeing ramps for the disabled outside the Port Office. It's not that disabled people did not exist before, he says, but now their rights are respected more. He also locates the growth in awareness of such rights to a general shift within the Jewish and non-Jewish world of being more prepared to put oneself out in order to provide amenities for specific sectors of the population, such as young parents, the elderly and disabled.

Irrespective of these forces, Schreiber believes those opposing the eruv were able to maintain their protest so effectively because of the presence of a handful of vocal secular Jews in their number. He describes this group as being very embarrassed by what they view as flaunting Jewishness and deeply uncomfortable with their own assimilation. They don't want to feel they are different.

Schreiber says that during a one-to-one meeting with a local Jewish journalist who had written virulently against the eruv, he was told by the journalist: "I grew up in [the very Orthodox neighborhood of] Stanford Hill. I managed to escape from there when I was 17. I came to live here where nobody knew my background. I'm not going to have you and you lot putting a wire around me."

In public, the well-organized and press-savvy objectors to the eruv group used a wide range of arguments to oppose its construction. Some objected to any religious symbols in public, others viewed their home being considered part of the eruv as a contravention of their human rights. (See box for views of objectors).

As for the anti-Semites, Schreiber says they never had it so good, with Jewish opposition to the eruv validating their position and masking their prejudice. Various other interest groups joined the opposition including environmental

groups, bird protectors and campaigners for the blind although Schreiber says these were largely stirred into action by a hardcore of anti-eruv activists.

The imagery used by the opposition, for example, that the eruv would create a ghetto and spark anti-Semitism gave a very negative slant to the concept of an eruv, says Schreiber, and succeeded in causing much fear among traditionally tolerant local residents, bolstering opposition. The late Lord Soper, head of the Methodist church, was heard by Schreiber as referring to the eruv as a piece of Jewish impudence. If you tell the man in the street it will become a ghetto, people will quite legitimately be concerned, says Schreiber. But while a ghetto restricts and is imposed on us, an eruv is quite the opposite; it is there to make life easier.

Despite moving to Jerusalem in 1995, Schreiber has maintained his active role in the committee, aided by his frequent trips to London. So, after 15 years of waiting for the wire to go up, is he now celebrating? Only on the first Shabbat when the eruv can be used, he responds.

That Shabbat, Schreiber has promised to push a wheelchair-bound friend to synagogue and enjoy a bottle of whiskey that, he believes it or not, is older than the dispute.



BOUNDLESS LOBBYIST: Pro-eruv campaigner David Schreiber says opponents saw the eruv as a freaky thing, proposed by a handful of crazy religious fanatics.

Crossed wires

A sample of quotes found in the British press from opponents of the eruv

Stop the zealots

The eruv is in fact overwhelming opposed by Jews, even in Golders Green, with only a small number of well-organized and well-financed zealots in favor of imposing those strands of nylon fishing line on the rest of the (mostly non-Jewish) community. We all know what the impact of religious extremism has been in Israel, where the majority of Jews are secular and tolerant but, until recently, helpless in the face of single-minded fanaticism. Letter to the Guardian, July 1999

Civil rights affronted

We feel our human rights will be affected. It's a monstrous thing, an affront to civil rights. Quote from a member of the Forum Against Intrusive Eruvs in The Guardian, August 2002

Evading the rules

Either you observe the rules of the Sabbath, or you do not. The eruv is a device to evade them. Quote from a local

resident in London Journal, August 2002

Indulging their impositions

The daily lives of our Palestinian friends in Bethlehem are being made hellish by the arbitrary curfews imposed by the Israel military, earning a living, schooling, shopping for necessities, going to mass or to the mosque, even letting the children out for some fresh air, are all massively disrupted and cause untold suffering. It is richly ironic therefore that the coreligionists of those Israeli oppressors, living comfortably in north London, are seeking a little easement from the inconvenience of being unable to leave their homes one day a week, caused by their self-imposed religious observances.

We earnestly wish that our Jewish friends would abandon their self-absorption, and territoriality and make it plain to the Israeli government that its behavior offends against that justice and humanity which have been Judaism's contribution to our civilization. The Gentile communities where they

live would then, we're sure, be much more disposed to indulge them their little impositions of a few poles and wires. Letter to the Guardian, August 2002.

Like Northern Ireland

If this goes through, the Muslims will demand special privileges, the Hindus will do the same and we'll end up like Northern Ireland. Quote from a local resident in London Journal, August 2002

Fight pram power

I don't think we ought to be made to live for seven days a week with this boundary so that a minority can push a pram. Quote from a local resident in The Guardian, August 2002

Intifada conscious

It is particularly unsuitable given the current climate in the Middle East. This is a very mixed and harmonious area, we want it to stay that way. Quote from a member of the Eruv Boundary Opponents Group in the Independent, August 2002.



The first eruv pole being erected last month.