

Thousands will benefit from creation of eruv

ALAS, your columns are filling up again with misguided and misleading comments about the eruv — what it is and what it is not! When individuals with no mandate claim to speak for the “silent” majority, as did Mr Coltman last week, it is time for a closer look.

Clearly, there are a number of Jewish people who are embarrassed by the continuing and overt observance of their religion. While they preach “harmony” and a “mixed community”, they actually seek assimilation and are curiously in-

tolerant of harmless religious practice — particularly by other Jews.

Let me clear up two stubborn misunderstandings. Firstly, an eruv is not an “evasion of orthodox Jewish law”. This is a naughty misrepresentation by Mr Coltman. The provision of an eruv is a positive injunction, dating back to King Solomon’s time and practised throughout the world.

Generally speaking, it is an amenity that has been understood, welcomed and facilitated by the non-Jewish host community. In our times, the positive endorse-

ment of President Bush for the Washington eruv that includes the White House and the Supreme Court or the enthusiasm of Mayor Bradley in Los Angeles are typical responses. They understand that the eruv is merely an amenity that allows Jewish people, particularly mothers, the elderly and handicapped, to enjoy the Sabbath to the full.

By indicating a “community” area, the eruv enables them to get out with pushchairs and wheelchairs, which they presently cannot do. Jewish law forbids

them to do so without an eruv and positively encourages us to establish one wherever a community functions. If Mr Coltman and others think this is all mumbo-jumbo, that’s OK — they can ignore the few poles and thin line as they now ignore the thousands of telegraph poles and miles of overhead wire, cable TV boxes and other street furniture they pass every day.

The second misunderstanding is caused by not-very-subtle phrases such as “threatens to embrace no less than eight postal districts”; by which Mr Coltman chooses to make the eruv sound like a disease. The M25 embraces all the postal districts — so what?

Actually, the eruv is marked by existing features along 95pc of its 11-mile perimeter and about half a mile needs to be identified with posts and thin nylon line which is much less visibly intrusive than all the telegraph wire stretched across our streets. The eruv is no more sinister a delimiter than a postal district, a parish boundary or even large boards erected by the Corporation of London that declare an exclusive area to be “Hampstead Heath”.

To the shame of Barnet and our own people, a small number of Jews, including one or two councillors, are working out their mixed feelings over continued Orthodox practice in the name of a “silent” majority. Tens of thousands of Barnet residents stand to benefit, and for many hundreds of old and handicapped people, as well as young mums, the difference to their lives will be significant.

We should not let the intolerance of a few, who suffer no loss of amenity, distort the benign and positive nature of an eruv and mar the excellent reputation for social harmony in Barnet that would only be enhanced by this time-honoured facility.

DAVID SCHREIBER,
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HAVE Barnet Council got their “act” wrong about the eruv? They are dealing with the proposal under the Town and Country Planning Act, which is concerned with land (defined as “any corporeal hereditament”), not highways (ie, public footways, roadways, etc).

The proposal for the eruv could probably be considered under the Highways Act as a “recreational facility” on footways, and its poles as providing “a service for the benefit of a section of the public”.

However, the Highways Act gives to residents rights that are lacking in the Town and Country Planning Act. Thus, the eruv proposal under the Highways Act would require the consent of the owners and occupiers of the premises whose frontages would be used for parts of the eruv boundary.

Another important difference between the Acts is that Town and Country Planning focuses on planning considerations, whereas the purpose of a proposal is relevant under Highways. Why do the council consider a highways matter under Town and Country Planning?

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Eruv objectors ask Chief Rabbi to alter Jewish law

ERUV opponent. Jeffrey Segall is calling on Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks to issue a general dispensation of Jewish law to allow Orthodox Jews throughout the country to use prams and wheelchairs on the Sabbath for humanitarian reasons.

Mr Segall, of Cricklewood Lane, Child's Hill, said that even if an eruv were eventually set up in Barnet it would not help disabled people and mothers with young children living in other parts of the country who would still be bound by the Sabbath restrictions on pushing and carrying.

"The eruv committee made much of the fact, especially in the media, about the lady in a wheelchair who was housebound on the Sabbath, and therefore tried to get sympathy by this humanitarian aspect. People are unaware that if the eruv were allowed, people in a similar situation throughout the rest of the country would not be relieved of that disadvantage."

Mr Segall said it was possible under Jewish law to exempt people from restrictions if there was a good humanitarian reason and so render the eruv — a special area bounded by poles and wires — unnecessary. On Yom Kippur, for example, people who felt unwell while fasting were allowed to eat something.

"It is for the Chief Rabbi to make it clear that poles and wires are not religious symbols. He knows perfectly well that it is possible to have an eruv area without them. People don't realise that. He knows it is even possible to

have an eruv area with these same dispensations, but without a defined boundary. It is in the Talmud.

"The Chief Rabbi is recognised as the spokesman for the Jewish community. It is his responsibility to tell people that there are alternatives."

Elizabeth Lawrence, of Wentworth Road, Golders Green, said the Chief Rabbi ought to be more in touch with what was going on instead of living in an ivory tower. "Who is this eruv going to benefit when the majority of the Jewish community do not appear to want it anyway?"

She accused Mr Sacks of rudeness and not bothering to answer letters and queries on the issue. "He doesn't appear to want to be involved, which I find a strange attitude to something as divisive as the proposed eruv. There is already a cer-

tain amount of anti-Semitism around. Something like this isn't going to help. Up to now we have had very good community relations in this borough."

Rhoda Goodman, assistant executive director of the Chief Rabbi's office, said the situation with the eruv was not completely resolved as yet and did not think it was a "particularly good idea" for him to issue a statement.

Mr Segall's suggested dispensation would fall outside the parameters of Jewish law and the Chief Rabbi would not have the authority to do it.

● The planning appeal against Barnet's refusal to grant permission for the eruv, which was initially expected to last for two days, has just been extended to four. It is now due to start on November 30 and continue until December 6.