

A matter of 85 poles on top of the 50,000 already there

MY GRANDFATHER was an Orthodox Jew, a venerated tzadik (righteous man), who would walk to synagogue on the Sabbath wearing his handkerchief knotted around his neck so as not to break the law by carrying anything in his pockets, writes Matthew Lewin.

I remember him talking to me scathingly about the hypocrisy of Jews who employed "Shabbas goys" — gentiles who would come in on Saturday, turn lights on and off, cook food, and carry out tasks forbidden by the Sabbath laws.

I am sure he, a distinguished scholar of the talmud, would have been just as scathing about the "relaxation" of those same laws within an eruv. To him, the definition of a symbolic area using motorways, railway lines and wires strung across poles in order to enlarge the private domain, would have been an absurdity.

Yet the concept of an eruv is a long-established one. There is an entire section of the talmud devoted to it, I am told, and there are successful eruvs in place in Canada, Belgium, France, Gibraltar, Australia — as well as in a whole clutch of major cities in the United States (including one in Washington DC which includes the Supreme Court and Baptist President Clinton's White House).

There is also one in Strasbourg, which is defined entirely by canals and railway lines, and which therefore has no wires strung between poles across gaps or "gateways" in the eruv boundary.

The proposed eruv in Barnet would benefit what the United Synagogue's eruv committee describes as a "substantial" number of observant Jews — perhaps as many as 10,000 people. The committee, for example, had little trouble finding 3,450 people to sign the petition in favour of the eruv which went to Barnet Council on Tuesday — although members admit that the signatories clearly included people who are not themselves observant but who still support the idea in principle.

Thousands stand to benefit

Like my grandfather, the ultra-religious reject the idea altogether. Reform and Liberal Jews do not need it. But there is no doubt that thousands will benefit by being able to carry their prayer books, keys and spectacles as they walk to synagogues within the eruv, as well as push children in prams and people in wheelchairs. It will also benefit Jews who break these laws and feel uncomfortable about it.

It is certainly no duty of Barnet Council, the community at large, or the Ham & High, to pass judgment on the religious beliefs and practices of those who want to establish the eruv.

And if, like in Strasbourg, there were no gaps in the natural boundary of the Barnet eruv it would have been declared many months ago, and no-one not involved in the relevant observant Jewish community would have known about it, and could hardly have complained.

The issue therefore boils down to whether Barnet, the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust and the Department of Transport should allow the eruv committee, entirely at the expense of the local Jewish community, to erect and maintain 85 poles ranging in height from 3.5 metres to 6.5 metres, carrying 950 metres of 3mm braided wire and, across some of the shorter gaps, monofilament nylon line.

Now let's immediately put that into context: there are already an estimated 50,000 poles and some 2,000,000 metres of overhead wire in the area to be covered by the eruv, so an extra 85 poles would be an increase of 0.17pc — not enough, surely, to support an argument by the most sincere conservationist on visual amenity grounds.

People should bear in mind, too, that the eruv poles will not be marked in any special way, and will be indistinguishable from all other poles. They will not carry signs or any other indication that they are part of an eruv boundary.

David Schreiber, chairman of the committee, makes the point by noting that there is much more overhead wire in his small road in Hendon than would be erected in the entire eruv.

"In some ways it is much like a ramp for the disabled — it can be considered a minor loss of amenity for the general public, but an essential facility to a significant minority. The posts are only significant to Orthodox Jews and will be ignored by everybody else," Mr Schreiber said.

Mr Schreiber said that those who talked of the eruv as creating a ghetto were being mischievous. "An eruv is the mark of a free community, integrated within its host society yet continuing to respect traditional family and religious values.

"In contrast, a ghetto is a compound within which Jews have been forced to live as a means of persecution and is therefore an inappropriate reference," he said.

Los Angeles fears disappeared

The committee does not pretend that eruvs have been introduced without controversy elsewhere — but problems have disappeared. It refers to the text of a letter from Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley to the Mayor of Barnet, which read:

"It was with great pleasure that I took action some years ago which helped members of the local congregation to celebrate the Sabbath . . . simply by supporting their petition to erect an eruv.

"The action was without controversy here in Los Angeles, but . . . the fears expressed by those who were initially opposed to the eruv never materialised.

"I hope that you will help the observant Jews in your community to enjoy the observation of the Sabbath."

In a similar letter, the Mayor of Melbourne wrote to Barnet: "I believe that some concerns have been raised in London as to the eruv creating divisiveness . . . our experience does not support these concerns at all."

Even former President Bush got in on the act, saying in 1990: "There is a long tradition linking the establishment of eruvs with the secular authorities in the great political centres where Jewish communities have lived."

Mr Schreiber said: "No major planning objections have been raised but some people, often non-practising Jews, feel uneasy at the thought of an area being designated as having a particular significance to other Jews.

"The United Synagogue believes that these natural anxieties will quickly dissolve as everyone discovers that the eruv is totally benign and greatly appreciated."

He noted that the proposal had the full backing of the two local MPs, Finchley's Hartley Booth and John Marshall in Hendon South, and of Jewish Care, the largest Jewish social work agency in the UK.

"Naturally people are anxious about what sounds like a strange and new idea. This anxiety has been expressed by a handful of people primarily from within the Jewish community.

"The fact is that the eruv will not inconvenience anybody or cost them money. It will be a great benefit for thousands of local residents and enable them to get about freely on the Sabbath.

"This country has a fine tradition of tolerance for minority groups and their harmless practices and we look to the support and understanding of our co-religionists as well as of the wider community in which we are proud to live."



● Pro-eruv marchers outside Barnet Town Hall on Tuesday to hand in a petition.

3,500-name petition delivered

ORTHODOX Jews — largely young women and children in pushchairs — turned out in pouring rain to hand in a 3,450-signature petition in favour of the eruv at Barnet Town Hall in Hendon on Tuesday.

"We want the eruv now," read the banners, as they braved the elements and television cameras in support of the controversial proposal.

Mothers explained how they and their husbands went to synagogue in shifts because Jewish law meant they could not push their children in prams — without an eruv.

Rina Schreiber, daughter-in-law of eruv committee chairman David Schreiber,

who has an 18-month-old child, said she would like to be able to go and see her friends on the Sabbath. As a student at the Central School of Speech and Drama she does not have time during the week. "It's the one day I want to go out. It's a bit naff."

Tammy Morris, who also has a young child, said the problem could be remedied so easily. "The Sabbath is our day for the family. It is the summer that is the worst. You are always going to get people objecting to everything. It isn't as if we are pulling down trees or anything."

One woman with grown-up children said synagogue was not just a place where

people went on the Sabbath to pray. "There is a social element to it too. I really don't believe that the eruv is going to ghettoise this community. It is just going to allow Orthodox people who are here to have more freedom on the Sabbath day. It isn't going to hurt anybody, that's for sure."

Most synagogues do not currently have creches, but David Schreiber said they soon would have if the eruv got planning permission. During Passover, when the Sabbath carrying laws were not in force, mothers did come to synagogue with pushchairs. "Each community would have its own way of dealing with that," he said.

Eruv defence group: more evidence

THE JEWISH Defence League's chief of operations in London has given further evidence of the existence of the far-right organisation which appears to be making plans to set up a group to protect the proposed eruv.

The plans came to light in a document given to the Ham & High by responsible members of the Jewish community, which recorded a decision by an organisation calling itself the Kahana Defence Group to set up a low-profile protective group.

Yochanan Meyers, an American who has also worked for the JDL in the United States, told the Ham & High he had spoken to a member of the Kahana Defence Group in Golders Green. "I should imagine they are going to wait and see what is going to happen when the eruv is set up. People who follow the works of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane are not thugs. They are there to stop trouble rather than to go out and cause it."

The JDL, which has been operating in Britain for nearly three years, is an intelligence organisation which gathers infor-

mation on the Palestine Liberation Organisation, Mr Meyers added. It was originally set up by the late Rabbi Meir Kahane "to protect the rights of Jewish people".

Kach, the Israeli party led by Rabbi Kahane until his assassination two years ago, was outlawed because of its racist policies against Arabs and Palestinians.

The JDL has an office in central London but is in Golders Green "more than anything else", as well as Hampstead and Edgware. "We are far right. We believe that Israel belongs to Israel and not to the PLO. We would take part in the defence of the eruv, but there might not be any trouble."

The JDL had warned the Board of Deputies of British Jews years ago about the spread of anti-Semitism due to the Berlin Wall coming down. The board has denied the existence of such a group and declared that the Ham & High is the victim of a hoax to foment anti-Semitism. "They don't like to acknowledge any other organisation in this country but the

Board of Deputies," said Mr Meyers. "They have become blasé about most things. They are paper tigers."

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